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Nell and I

Joseph Epstein
Artie Glick in a Family Way—a story

Robert Schultz
Snowlight—a story

John Hales
Falling—a memoir

Harold Fromm
Humanities Beleaguered

POEMS BY Peter Schmitt, Laurence Lieberman, Robert Hill Long, Andrea Hollander Budy, Tom Sexton

THE FUTURE OF THE BOOK BY Thomas M. Disch

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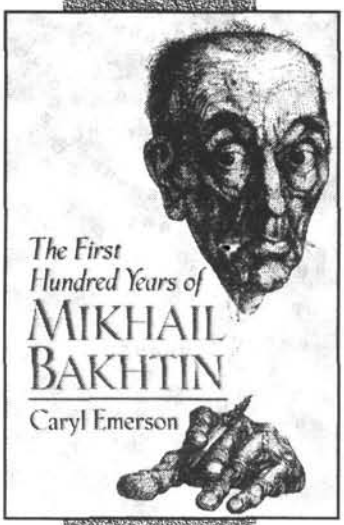
Thinking Russian



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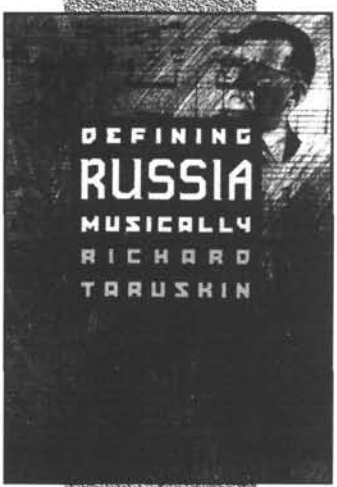

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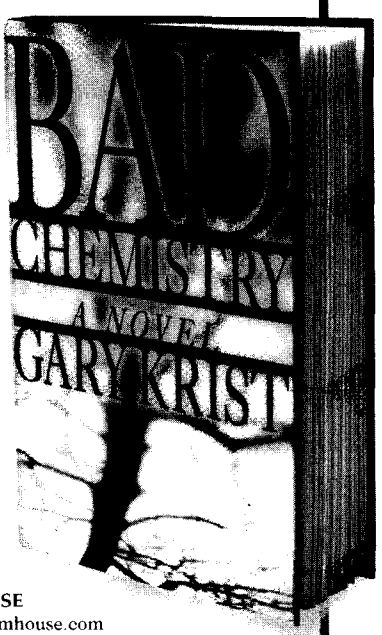

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TO OUR READERS

THE HUDSON REVIEW announces that increased postal and production costs have made necessary an increase in its subscription rates. Effective with the 50th Anniversary Issue (Spring 1998), the new rates will be: one year, $28; two years, $50; three years, $72. Please add $4 per year for subscriptions outside the U.S.

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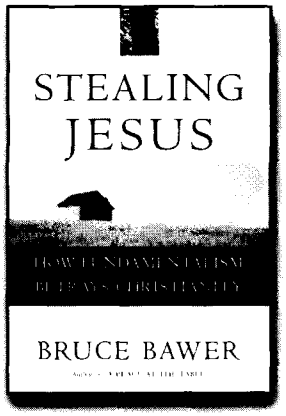
What, in God's name, is the Religious Right doing with Jesus?



Bruce Bawer, author of *A Place at the Table*, brilliantly and methodically uncovers the contradictions of the Religious Right and its campaign to separate Christianity from Jesus' teachings of love and forgiveness. *Stealing Jesus* is a ringing testament from a man equally disturbed by the notions of an America without Christianity and an American Christianity without love or compassion.

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Comment:

The Future of the Book: A Prophecy

"GIVE ME BOOKS, FRUIT, FRENCH WINE AND FINE WEATHER and a little music out of doors, played by somebody I do not know." So John Keats, writing to his sister Fanny in August of 1819, from Winchester where he'd gone "for the purpose of being near a tolerable Library, which after all is not to be found in this place." Even so, he rambles on, "[W]e like it very much: it is the pleasantest Town I ever was in, and has the most recommendations of any. There is a fine Cathedral which to me is always a source of amusement .... The whole town is beautifully wooded—From the Hill at the eastern extremity you see a prospect of Streets, and old Buildings mixed up with Trees . . . "

And so on, and so forth, setting things down as they occur to him, without the least effort or art, until he hits upon that first phrase, a riff that reads like a prescient gloss on Khayyam/Fitzgerald's "A Book of Verses underneath the Bough, / A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou / Beside me, singing in the Wilderness—." What Keats's words evoke—and embody—is the ephemeral nature of both the written word and of other pleasures traditionally recognized as fleeting.

Keats was not writing for posterity, not in this letter, with its postcard-prose "Prospect of Streets, and old Buildings, mixed up with Trees." Keats was twenty-four, his sister sixteen. His tone with Fanny was one of comfortable, sitting room small talk, and when he did toss off a pretty phrase, there's no sense that he's been hoarding his epigrams for the occasion or even paid any attention to his epigrams for the occasion or even paid any attention to his new-coined quotation-to-be. As a poet he was not diffident or self-effacing; he craved publication a.s.a.p., for he expected to die young. But he would not have supposed his letters—at least those to Fanny—would be part of his oeuvre. They were a social grace, ephemeral as a smile across the dinner table.

In the future such day-lily transience will once again be the fate of most writing, even most writing of a high order. Poetry is leading the way, as publishers, both trade and academic, trim from their lists those authors—and genres—they know they cannot sell profitably. Soon enough, midlist fiction—the kind one writes to earn an M.F.A.—will enjoy the same extinction, along with such related belle-lettrist genres as literary criticism and biography.

On the evidence of contemporary bookshops—the so-called superstores with their immense stocks of different titles—this might seem an

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unwarranted and alarmist prediction, on a par with the recent spate of full-page, four-color ads for the book—what was its title?—announcing the end of the world this very year. But a book's passing presence in a shop does not mean that anyone anywhere will buy a copy. Rather it is like the butterfly part of an insect's life cycle, when it can be an element of that picnic landscape of "books, fruit, french wine and fine weather, and a little music out of doors."

The superstores do sell some books, of course, or they would be ephemeral themselves. Most of what they stock is nonfiction, and a great deal of that nonfiction instructional, inspirational, or self-help titles. Cookbooks are dependable, though if CD-ROM ever gets up and running, cookbooks might become as obsolete as first novels. What else sells? Blockbuster novels by dependable brand-name authors. The memoirs and pensées of TV and sports celebrities, and other media-driven books. Pricey picture books suitable for gift-giving, especially children's books. Trade hardcovers of such titles will continue to appear for the foreseeable future (a decade, at least), while established backlist titles that are required reading in schools and colleges will fill the trade paperback shelves.

The university presses shall inherit the rest, but it will be no blessed inheritance—more like the debts of a spendthrift parent. Poetry lists have been the first to be scuttled, because their advocates usually have the least clout within the university, and because small presses specializing in poetry already exist as an option. For university presses that would like to offer some balm to the wounded egos of poets, there is a subterfuge that might serve that purpose. In an age of desktop publishing, it should not take that much money to print and bind the fifty or sixty copies of the physical "book" that a poetry workshop instructor must produce from time to time to authenticate his or her professional competence and status. There is even some justification for the university and/or its press to pick up some part of the cost of such vanity publishing, since the economic viability of their workshop programs depends on offering published writers as instructors in such programs. So, as long as the dice don't seem too obviously loaded, it would behoove university presses to maintain a system of back-scratching whereby Press X publishes the work of faculty at University Y, and Press Y reciprocates. But this is only possible if the universities themselves recognize that they have a vested interest in underwriting the illusion that their faculty members are professionals who can pass on the secrets of their own success. First novels, collections of stories, essays, and even postcards to kid sisters might receive similar "virtual" publication. Physical copies would not appear in bookstores, except in local bookstores where the author would give signings, but the title would be there in the catalog, and it could be kept technically in print for an indefinite period.

For the past two years, since publishing a book of poetry criticism in which I suggested that not all poetry professionals are actually capable

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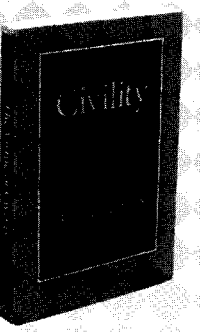

Edward Shils (1920–1995) was one of the leading intellectual defenders of freedom in the twentieth century. Learned in history, politics, literature, economics, theology, and legal history, he taught for many years at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought and at Peterhouse College, Cambridge. In these nine essays, Shils explores the importance of civility and tradition to a free society. The essays' significance is enormous, for Shils was one of the first and assuredly one of the most courageous writers to examine the natures of civility and civil society and their relation to a free, ordered, liberal democratic society. As H.R. Trevor-Roper has written, "Deeply concerned for the Western values of rationality, freedom, and progress, Shils was dismayed by the threat which they now faced: the threat posed by the absolute individualism into which Western Liberalism had degenerated." Among the essays are "Tradition and Liberty: Antinomy and Interdependence," "Max Weber and the World Since 1920," and "The Modern University and Liberal Democracy."

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poets, I have been receiving letters from aspirant poets of all ages who are confident that because I share their disrespect for this or that published poet I will therefore want to read and to assist at the publication of the manuscript enclosed with the letter. In this they mirror the sense of entitlement that is endemic within the poetry community. An Australian poet, writing in *American Book Review*, levels this stern judgment: "The crime is largely, here as in the US, that so many excellent poets have been forced out onto the streets to scrounge around for new publishing venues. In Australia the lack of support for poetry by university presses has made it sorely hard for new voices to emerge."[1] In other words, an unpublished poet has the same claim on the public purse as a homeless person—both having been forced onto the street to beg.

It is not only the unpublished who profess to be distressed that there are writers who suffer the shame and hunger of being unpublished or, what is almost worse, having one's books unlovingly reviewed. Edmund White, America's most eminent gay novelist, in a leading article in *The Nation*, has urged that critical standards of whatever sort are incompatible with a sense of decency and the idea of multiculturalism. After presenting a long catalogue of the many works of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry that have been inspired by the AIDS epidemic, White asks himself

> Do I want to say that I'd be willing to vouch for this art, or even that I considered it all art?
>
> That question makes me uncomfortable, whenever it's raised, especially about the work of living writers, but it is exacerbated when the subject matter is AIDS and even more so when the writer has AIDS or has died from AIDS complications. I can scarcely defend my feeling beyond saying that it strikes me as indecent to hand out grades to men and women on the edge of the grave. Who are we to judge them? Who are sero-negative critics to judge us? It sometimes seems strange to me that now, at a moment when literary fiction is being challenged for its very right to exist, people are still squabbling over questions of artistic rank and precedence. Elsewhere I have argued that the whole concept of the canon—of any canon, no matter how up-to-date and carefully revised and balanced—is unsuitable to our society. To me the idea of multiculturalism is incompatible with a canon; now I'd go even further and say multiculturalism is incompatible with the whole business of handing out critical high and low marks.[2]

[1] Richard Deutch, "The State of Publishing Poetry Books in Australia 1996," *American Poetry Review*, May–June 1997.

[2] Edmund White, "Journals of the Plague Years," *The Nation*, May 12, 1997. Adapted from a talk delivered on January 9, 1997, at the AIDS and Literature Conference in Key West, Florida.

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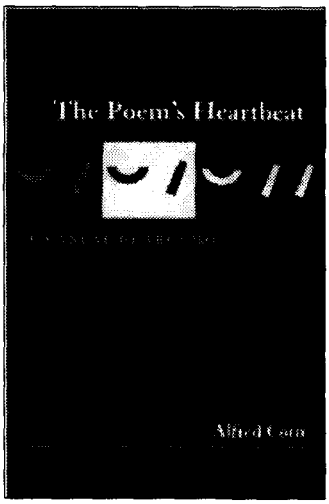

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White has the courage to take the next logical step, suggesting to his readers that they "Read the books that come your way, let serendipity be your guide, buy street poetry that's been photocopied, study what someone has scrawled on his paper placemat."

White will probably find that a surprising number of publishers are on his side in his all-welcoming embrace of whomever. Publishers need no longer waste editors' time and investors' money by making odious comparisons between the work of, for instance, Edmund White, and some less prestigious writer of "literary fiction," that endangered species. They can simply limit their entire output to non-literary fiction and other salable commodities. Publishers who think that too draconian a measure might set aside some small portion of their budgets for publishing the literary stuff on a lottery basis with a strict quota system to ensure proportional representation to all stripes of the multicultural rainbow. Indeed; this is not too different from the system that currently obtains at many presses, except that the lottery in place is the same as that governing the academic job market, where publication depends on whom you network with. White's commendation of serendipity will work out the same in practice, for the placemats likeliest to come to his attention are those of dinner companions sitting near him at the A-list table.

White may be right in more ways than he imagines when he declares multiculturalism to be incompatible with honest critical assessments, and while in theory I favor the latter meritocratic option, White clearly has both history and fashion on his side in opting for sitting everyone down at one big table and giving them napkins to write on. That table, of course, is the Internet, where, for a very small investment, one can fill thousands, even millions, of mailboxes with one's New and Selected Poems. There is no need to go to the expense of photocopying and the embarrassment of standing on a street corner waiting for Edmund White to come and be presented with a copy. Just e-mail it to his Web-site in Paris. The literary Web-sites and virtual "living rooms" on the Net are already abuzz and brimming over with poems, stories, and whole novels begging to be read and praised. Once writers have finally resigned themselves to the fact that literature is no longer a way of earning a living, poetry and scholarship can be restored to their sixteenth-century innocence as the meeting ground of kindred spirits who now can share their work with the speed of a keystroke.

With regard to knowledge that is not fenced in by copyright considerations the Net promises a Golden Age. All archival material should become accessible on the Web-sites of any persons or institutions that care to take the trouble to digitalize their holdings. The next Anaïs Nin may make her every letter and journal entry public knowledge even as her cursor moves across the screen.

What chiefly prevents this utopia of free data from existing already is the reluctance of moneyed interests in developing the electronic equivalent of the book—a simple machine for reading that would allow

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John Keats to access a library superior to any in Winchester as he takes his ease in the meadow, something no larger or heavier than a cellular phone, that can telescope to a self-illuminated screen of a size that allows for a comfortable typeface in one's favorite font, with enough memory to store a few shelves of reference books in permanent memory along with whatever one is currently reading.

One can further posit an information highway where a phone call to the library would allow one to download any title listed in *Books in Print*, including "virtual" books in the university press catalogs and anthologies of choice paper placemats. But how would one accommodate those publishers who expect to *sell* the books they publish and the authors who write those books? If an entire novel can be downloaded in the twinkling of an eye, can't it be passed along as easily? The electronic book will have to have a copyright-protection system built in or the publishing industry will self-destruct.

That is surely the chief reason why such a technology has been so laggard in its development: there seems to be no way to maintain existing monopolies on materials so easily duplicable. The xerox machine has already wreaked havoc with textbook publishers, as professors find they can create and vend their own textbooks without the payment of permission fees. Electronic publishing will probably lead to the further balkanization of textbook publishing—as each university and college more intensively exploits the sales potential of its captive audience. Why should school boards spend billions on textbooks when each child can have texts tailored to his or her individual needs downloaded into a Sony reading machine, the equivalent of a long shelf of books that fits into a knapsack?

Libraries, so long the most dependable market for marginal books, will face a similar extinction. My local newspaper, in Upstate New York, *The River Reporter*, recently had a story about the Sunshine Hall Library in nearby Eldred. The library, with a $17,000 annual budget, just spent $5,000 to build a handicapped access ramp leading to a new rear exit. No one can get to the Eldred library except by car, and therefore those in wheelchairs would already have on hand someone to help them mount the single step at the front entrance of the building. $5,000 could have bought a lot of books, but that would not have put bread on the table of a local contractor. The Sunshine Hall is certainly not alone in making the fees and salaries of local residents its first priority—a priority that can best be served by making all libraries mere data terminals accessing, with the help of professional librarians, the information once to be found on the printed page.

As for literature, in the old-fashioned, honorific sense, it will not disappear, but like the opera, the ballet, painting, sculpture and other arts, it will become increasingly a curatorial venue. There have already been more good books written than any of us can ever get around to. If one is too often disappointed by the current offerings of publishers, the past is vast and easily accessible in an age of mechanical reproduction.

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As with classical music, it will be the backlist that wags the dog. After all, if opera buffs had to depend upon living composers to satisfy their needs, all the opera houses of the world would close within a week. The same fate has recently overtaken musical comedy on Broadway, where only revivals seem viable. New musicals are produced, but the only ones of merit are written by very old men, like Kander and Ebb or Cy Coleman, who learned their craft when a Darwinian survival of the fittest acted as a quality control mechanism.

One of the nails in the coffin of the Broadway musical was its ever more prohibitive expense. The opposite is the case with literature. As electronic publishing allows anyone to self-publish on the Net almost for free (and even to produce books at the cost of paper and binding), we can expect legions of the once unpublishable to assert their claims on our attention. And the etiquette of multiculturalism insists that such claims be honored, if only by a high-toned refusal "to hand out grades to men and women on the edge of the grave." Are we not all, in some sense, on the edge of the grave? Literature has, traditionally, claimed that to be the case, so exemption from criticism should likewise be our common privilege. As, by and large, it has become—at least within the little world of poetry.

But I don't worry for the future of poetry. Poets either have enough vainglory to act as the race's unacknowledged legislators and write more poems, or they will poop out at around age thirty, as most do. Poets can be expected to write poetry with no other incentive than the act itself provides. But other kinds of writers might well decide that their art is not one to be pursued only for art's sake. Who would go on drudging at novels, biographies, or learned treatises if the rewards were neither fame nor money? The answer is already clear. Those seeking an academic degree and/or a tenured position.

So long as "Publish or Perish" is the law of the land in academia, writers will have more reason to write than publishers to publish, and publishers will be able to pay ever smaller advances on ever more meager royalties, thereby creating an ever shallower pool of writing talent to draw upon. Already the brighter and more advantaged aspirants to careers in "communications" are lighting out for other media that don't require the antiquated skills associated with authorship. Those apprenticed to the art of fiction and their own peer group of editors and critics have lately favored a Lite style of prose in which the pronoun "I" lives, careless of grammar and syntax, in an eternal present tense.

Indeed, that is yesterday's ill omen. Lately, another way has been found to lower the hurdles for the benefit of those who jump differently. The personal memoir has replaced the first novel as the preferred task for winning an M.A. It has always been received wisdom in creative writing workshops that one should write about what one knows, and what does the average M.A. candidate know at the age of twenty-three or twenty-four? Beyond his or her grievances with regard to parents and

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playmates, virtually nothing, but that has been no impediment to the proliferation of courses in the writing of memoirs, since autobiography has a unique merit for the student writer, its imperviousness to criticism. If it seems cruel to sit in judgement on a novel or a sheaf of poems, how much crueler to do so with respect to the curriculum vitae of a soul stripped bare. Would you give a poor grade to someone's suicide note?

By how many years the writing workshop industry will outlast midlist, not-for-profit book publishing depends not on rational considerations of supply and demand but on the continued health of the myth of the freelance writer as a culture hero, able to earn big money and defy the system at the same time. The dream of writerly success is the lottery of the literati, and there need be only a single John Grisham in any decade for that dream to thrive even on the rockiest soil. In fact, the less the workshops demand, in terms of students measuring up to some kind of professional standard, the greater their appeal to potential consumers, who chiefly are seeking not a career but a source of self-esteem.

The future of the book? Allowing for the haziness of all prophecy, it seems safe to say that there will be fewer and fewer books, and more and more writers, whose work will be accessed, if at all, in its Platonic form, through the Net. Once the technology of the reading machine has been perfected the printed book will go the way of incunabula, the 78-rpm record, and Beta tapes. Publishers will perish and most books will become landfill on the shores of an ocean of free-flowing data.

THOMAS M. DISCH

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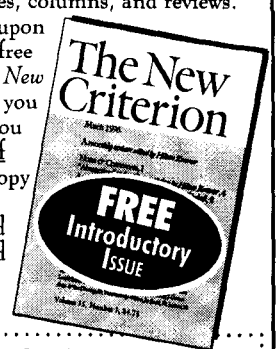

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JOSEPH EPSTEIN

Artie Glick in a Family Way

Artie Glick, emerging from his therapist's office on Michigan Avenue, was more puzzled than usual. He thought Dr. Lieberman would have been pleased at his announcement of his decision to marry. True, Artie was fifty-seven; true, too, he had failed at marriage once before, though that was eighteen years ago. Lindsey Connors, the woman he planned to marry, was, at thirty-eight, nearly twenty years younger than he. Until now this hadn't seemed to Artie a complicating factor. Until now neither had her Catholicism. Lindsey's Catholicism, it turned out, had forced Artie's hand. She was what she herself called a cafeteria Catholic, picking and choosing what she liked from the religion she had grown up in. Church doctrine against contraception—no, she felt she didn't have to live with that; the doctrine against abortion—yes, emphatically yes, that she felt she must live with.

The evening Lindsey told Artie she was pregnant she also told him that she couldn't bring herself to undergo an abortion. Which didn't, she quickly added, mean that he had to marry her. The sloppiness that had resulted in her pregnancy was her responsibility, she told Artie, and she was prepared to live with its consequences. She was a lawyer, with a well-paying job at the firm of Sidley & Austin, one of the city's best, and money wasn't a problem. Neither was bringing up a child out of wedlock any longer the disgrace it once was. Besides, at thirty-eight, she might not have another chance to have a child. No, she told Artie, he needn't worry, unless he wanted to.

"But, baby," Artie found himself saying, "I want to worry. The responsibility is mine, too."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," Artie answered, hoping she didn't notice him gulp before he said it.

This wasn't Artie's style at all. His style, at least with women, was one of hesitancy, non-commitment, deep caution. Gravely dis-

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trustful of his own instincts and of women's motives, he always held back, chose never to make other than the most deliberate moves. Dr. Lieberman once called him, in sexual relations, a passive paranoiac.

Dr. Monroe Lieberman, five years older than Artie, had himself been married three times and had had two children with each of his wives. As far as Artie could determine, none of these kids had had it easy; Lieberman's eldest child, Ariadne, was forty years old, fifty or so pounds overweight, worked in a vintage clothing shop on Halsted Street, and she was the most successful of his children. Yet, somehow, none of Lieberman's own domestic disasters—he frequently used them to illustrate his advice—seemed to put the least dent in his sublime confidence. Artie began going to him thirteen years ago, not long after his father's death, at seventy-five bucks an hour; he was now paying him a hundred and forty.

"So remind me, Arthur," Lieberman said, when Artie told him about his forthcoming marriage, "how long have you known this young woman you now propose to marry?"

"About five months," Artie said.

"Not all that long, really," said Lieberman, with a cool and warning distance in his voice. He was a pudgy man, small, with red-rimmed eyes under heavy black-framed glasses. He must have been a terrible athlete as a kid, Artie often thought.

"No," said Artie, "I suppose it's not."

"This is very unlike you, Arthur, you, who are usually so circumspect with women. We therapists tend to worry when our patients act in wildly uncharacteristic ways."

"She's carrying my child," Artie said.

"An old-fashioned phrase, Arthur, very Victorian actually. And can you be certain it's yours?"

A dirty mind never sleeps, Artie thought, especially a shrink's mind. Artie didn't much like Lieberman. Incomplete transference, Lieberman would probably call it; he'd never got to the part about liking, let alone loving, him. But, then, why had he remained with him so long, seeing him twice a week? That, Artie suspected, was probably why he was a sick guy.

Artie's problem, Lieberman continued to insist, was his father, dead fourteen years now but still, according to Lieberman, haunting his son. The father was a ghost Artie had refused to bury, or so Lieberman claimed.

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Herschel Gliksner had emigrated from Lodz, at the age of nineteen, in 1928, arriving in America just in time for the Depression. In the attempt to Americanize himself, he changed his name to Harry Glick, but never lost his greenhorn's accent. He drifted into the dry-cleaning business, much of which, in those days, was run by Jews. He worked long hours, saved, and by the end of the War had five shops, nine trucks on the street, and a plant with eighty-five workers on the payroll. A smallish man, with a low hairline, all muscle, he drove himself and he drove his sons no less hard. Artie's brother, Barry, managed an early escape; he went to dental school and soon after graduating set up a practice in Tiburon, in Marin County, California. Artie, who went to Roosevelt University, went to work for Top-Notch Cleaners with his father.

In all their time together, when he was a boy through the twenty-two years he worked with his father at Top-Notch, Artie could not recall a single calm conversation between them. His father lectured, hectored, badgered; argued, screamed, cursed; he lived in a state of continuous irritation. Nor could Artie remember a time when the old man gave him credit for having any judgment. Once, when he was already a married man and thirty-five years old, Artie heard his father, in his office at the plant, say over the phone to one of his pinochle cronies, "Go on vacation? Whaddya kiddin' me? Who'd run the place? For help I got nothin' but idiots." Artie felt his stomach turn over. He probably should have quit right then. But he was married—had, in fact, a childless and rocky marriage—and no place to go. All he knew was the dry-cleaning business.

When Harry Glick had had his second heart attack, and his physician had practically forced the old man to take time off, from Florida he'd call Artie at least once every two hours, reminding him of this, telling him not to forget that, assuming always that his now forty-three-year-old son had no brains, no common sense. Always behind his father's questions, instructions, advice, there was a barely hidden anger. Was it, Artie wondered, directed at him, or at the world? He never felt he could ask. He never really found out why his father was always so ticked off.

His father's bypass surgery was done at St. Francis Hospital in Evanston, where the head of the coronary unit was a tall lean surgeon named Tom Murphy. When Artie first saw him, he

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thought he ought to be wearing a white silk scarf, for he looked more like a test pilot than a surgeon. Dr. Murphy told Artie that the surgery was very iffy; the two attacks had greatly weakened his father's heart, but they had no choice but to operate.

Artie was in his father's room when they came to take him down to surgery. He called Artie over to his bed, beckoned him to lean over so that he could whisper in his ear. Artie thought his father had something deeply personal to tell him. Instead he pointed to the slender bronze crucifix on the wall above his bed, and, in his accented English, whispered: "If I don't come out of dis alive, take dat cross off the wall and shove it up dis guy Moiphy's *tuchis*." His father died on the operating table. So far as Artie knew, those were Harry Glick's last words.

In the fourteen years since his father's death, Artie had built up Top-Notch to ten shops with twelve trucks on the street. He had acquired exclusive rights to a process for cleaning suede and leather, so that dry cleaners all over Chicago sent problem garments to him. His payroll was just under two hundred people. He often wondered what his old man would have thought of all this.

The Koreans were taking over the dry-cleaning business in Chicago, and a syndicate headed by a family named Kim had made Artie an offer of $4.5 million for Top-Notch. He assumed that that number meant they would close for $5 million, and he took it to an old high-school friend named Larry Engel, who was a partner at Sidley & Austin. Engel, who specialized in trusts and estates, passed Artie along to Lindsey Connors. She was blond, small-boned, authoritative, had a winning sense of humor. After the first time they slept together, following two business lunches and a dinner at Kiki's on Franklin Street, she said, "That was so nice I don't think I'll even bother to bill you for it."

They went to lots of movies together. Artie learned that she had four brothers, all athletes, so that when Artie took her to Bulls games she knew what was going on. She grew up in Newton Center, outside Boston; had gone to Mount Holyoke, then to Northwestern Law School. Not yet a partner in her firm, she worked the twelve-hour day. Artie saw her mostly on weekends; sometimes they would spend all day Sunday together at his apartment on Scott Street, off State Parkway, he shuffling through the fat *Trib*, a Bear game playing like Muzak in the background,

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she tapping away at her laptop on his dining-room table. There was no talk about their moving in together. Artie had never told her he loved her. And now, it seemed, he had committed himself to marrying her.

"Tell me, Arthur," Dr. Lieberman asked, "why would you do this?"

"Because," said Artie, "I feel I have a responsibility toward the child."

"Forgive me if I question your motives here, Arthur," said Lieberman, "though you know questioning your motives is one of the things you pay me for, isn't it? But this young woman, and maybe even her baby, do they really need you? Maybe things work the other way around. Do you, by any chance, I wonder, need them?"

"What the hell for?"

"Well, to put it gently, Arthur, to make a life for yourself."

Up yours, fat boy, thought Artie. "I have a life," he said.

"Do you really?"

Artie usually arrived at the plant around 7:00 A.M. Most days he hung around until 6:00, when he drove over to the McClurg Court Health Club. There he played racquet ball, or got into a half-court basketball game; he might swim afterward or sit for twenty minutes in the sauna. He was on the periphery of the McClurg Court regulars, as he thought of them, Jewish bachelors and divorced guys, roughly his own age, and some five or ten years older. Ex-athletes, they had gone to Senn or Sullivan, Von Steuben or Roosevelt high schools. They talked stock tips, sports, sex. Over the years Artie had met a number of women at McClurg—enough so that he didn't yet have to sink to Jewish singles dances. He took them to dinner; he met them for breakfast; sometimes he scored, sometimes not. Three times a year he went down to Miami, to visit his mother who at eighty-two—knock wood—was still in pretty good shape. Once every couple of years he would spend four days on the Coast with his brother and his family. Add in two fifty-minute sessions each week with Lieberman. Wasn't that a life?

"And marriage, Arthur," Lieberman continued, "marriage, wouldn't it be fair to say, hasn't exactly been your strong suit, has it?"

"That was nearly twenty years ago," Artie replied.

Artie had to admit that his marriage, which lasted seven years,

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was the worst goddamn time of his life. Judy Levy was his age. They had both gone to Sullivan together. Why they married in the first place wasn't clear to Artie—everyone in those days seemed to marry in his early twenties, so why not him?—and became less clear as time went on. They began life together as two people who really didn't know each other and ended by hating each other. She couldn't have children; he didn't want to adopt. In the end, Judy caught him cheating on her with a Polish receptionist at the plant, which she was able to use to stick it to him for a handsome divorce settlement. ("Schmuck," said his father, when he found out, "you don't got enough sense not to piss in your own inkwell.") Judy, Artie had heard, had moved to Los Angeles, and had remarried. They had lost touch. Three or so years ago he saw her shopping at Fields—she must have been in town visiting her mother—and felt absolutely nothing.

" 'Affectlessness' we call it, Arthur," said Lieberman, "an inability to feel and show emotion in the right proportion. That's part of your problem, Arthur. That's part of the rich inheritance from your father."

Lieberman liked to bang away at the dead Harry Glick. Artie sometimes liked to imagine a meeting between the two. "I sense deeply repressed rage in you, Arthur," Lieberman had said to Artie on more than one occasion. In Harry Glick, Lieberman could have seen the real thing, on the surface, in full display. As for his father, two minutes with Monroe Lieberman and he would have turned to Artie and said, "Dis son of a bitch, what is he—crazy? And you, you're paying him hard-earned money to listen to your troubles. Maybe you're crazier than he is." One of the nice things about his father, Artie thought, was that after him life seemed pretty easy.

Yet if life were so easy, why, Artie asked himself, now so long after his father's death, was he still in therapy? He told himself that he felt an emptiness in his life—something wrong, something missing. Artie was not proud of being in therapy. He never told his brother about it, though the two of them often talked about growing up with the old man. Oddly, a month or so after he had begun to go out with her, he told Lindsey that he was in therapy.

"Oh," she said, "Jewish golf."

"Jewish golf?"

"Psychotherapy is what Jews have instead of golf," she said.

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"Gentiles try to improve their backswing, Jews their past. I'm not sure that either, after great expense and effort, has much luck." She told him that half the Jewish kids she knew at Mount Holyoke were in therapy. Others had been bonkers about contemporary painting. Still others put their faith in radical politics. Some went in for all three. "They hit the trifecta," she said.

Lindsey's conversation was filled with such stuff. It came of growing up with four brothers and working around aggressive men at Sidley & Austin. She had a strong sense of reality and a comic view of those who, out of self-deception, didn't. Between college and law school she had taken three years off and worked in a fish canning factory in Australia, as a waitress in Tel Aviv, as a secretary in Manhattan. She seemed to have no fear of life, none whatsoever.

"How did you get to the age of thirty-eight without marrying?" Artie asked her one night in bed.

"Just lucky, I guess," she replied.

"Really?" he asked.

"Truth is," she said, "I think even brave men are a little afraid of me."

"How so?"

"They sense I can see through them."

"Can you?"

"Usually, yes, I think I can."

"What about me? What do you see in me?"

"A moderately screwed-up guy," she said, "but not a bullshitter. And let me tell you something, friend, in the current market 'not a bullshitter' is fairly rare."

This conversation had taken place before Lindsey had announced her pregnancy and before Artie had asked to stay with her and their child. Now that he had asked, it made more sense than ever that he sell Top-Notch. The child, his and Lindsey's, would need him, or so he imagined. If he got $5 million for the business, by the time he paid his mother and brother their shares, took care of taxes and fees, he'd still get away with a little more than $2 million, which, along with his own savings and investments, meant he wouldn't have to work again. Would he miss it? He doubted it—it was dry cleaning, after all, not portrait painting or pro basketball—though you never knew. Having a serious

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hand in bringing up a child seemed O.K.—more than O.K., it seemed damn nice.

Artie assumed Lindsey would want to return to work after the birth of the child. Her career was still ahead of her. Artie hadn't really had a career, but his life, he began to feel, might just be in front of him. Time to begin. With a little luck, he hoped to be able to live long enough to see his child out of college. With a little more luck still, he might see him or her settled in life.

"Arthur," said Lieberman, leaning in and removing his glasses, "I'm not going to shit you here, this marriage is a serious mistake. Don't make it. This is all sheer fantasy formation on your part, believe me."

Artie didn't want to believe him, but the fact was that he had of late taken, in dreamy moments, to thinking a lot of his life with Lindsey and their child. He imagined a daughter. He would like her to be named Anna, after his maternal grandmother, whom he could barely remember but whose favorite grandchild he, Artie, was supposed to be. He imagined her small and fair, like her mother, but otherwise Jewish, in her instincts, outlook, general smarts. (Would she be raised Jewish? Artie hoped so, but had not yet brought the matter up with Lindsey.) He saw himself taking her to the park, buying her toys and clothes, playing with her, later teaching her what he knew about life. He imagined her a good athlete, a tennis player maybe, like her mother a whiz at school, goodhearted, affectionate, a sweet kid, a daddy's girl. Was this fantasy formation or just pleasant dreams? There must be a difference between the two. What was wrong with dreaming anyhow?

"Look," Artie said, "first you tell me that I haven't really got a life, and now, when I have the chance for one, you tell me that I'm not ready for a life. That doesn't leave me with much room to maneuver, Doctor Lieberman."

"I don't think you follow me, Arthur. What I am saying is that you have some unfinished business with your father, and until that is cleared up any significant relationship you enter into is doomed to failure."

"You know, Doctor, nothing personal, but sometimes I think you hate my father more than I do. Besides, I'm fifty-seven. At the rate we're going, you'll have me in perfect mental health just in time for death."

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"How soon things get cleared away is entirely up to you, Arthur. It always has been."

"And if I disregard your advice?"

"As I say, I think you'd be making a grave mistake. And I'd have to conclude that you no longer need my advice and our relationship as doctor and patient would probably be at an end."

"I'll think about it and let you know," Artie said, getting up, looking at his watch, and deciding to spot Lieberman the twenty minutes he still had to go in the session. Let him use it to take a leak and have a coffee.

"See you Thursday?" Lieberman said.

"Sure," Artie said, "at noon."

Back at the plant, he had a call from Lindsey. She had just returned from her obstetrician and had something she needed to tell him. Was he free for dinner? They agreed to meet, at seven, in the downstairs room at Binyon's, across from the Standard Club.

When Artie arrived, Lindsey was already there, seated in a booth against the far wall, a glass of white wine before her, fiddling with the stem of the glass, looking, he thought, nervous. She was wearing a dark grey suit, with a thin chalk stripe, a killer lawyer's suit. At any rate, she killed him in it. For some reason this was one of those moments—there were many of them—when he thought of the difference in their ages. If he lived long enough, she might have to push him down the boardwalk in a chair, change his diapers, God knew what else. He felt, not for the first time, that he was getting the better deal here. Well, at least she would have his money and the child.

"Greetings, Counselor," he said, kissing her on the cheek, then sliding into the other side of the booth. He noted that she had already ordered him a drink, a vodka and tonic.

"Greetings, client and billee," she said. "How goes it?"

"All is quiet on the dry-cleaning front."

"Are there dry-cleaning jokes?" she wanted to know. "Unlike lawyer jokes, about whom, as we both know, there are none."

"Dry cleaners, as you may not know, are famous for their wit. Yet in more than thirty years in the business, I've not heard a single dry-cleaning joke. Hard to account for this."

"It is, especially in light of the famous dry-cleaning wit. But

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rather than make up a dozen or so dry-cleaning jokes, let me tell you my news."

"It's not bad?" Artie said.

"I don't know," Lindsey said, "maybe that's for you to judge."

"Now I am nervous," he said. "Out with it."

"I realize you're already sitting down, so hold onto the edge of the table."

"O.K.," he said, "hit me with it."

"First take a swallow of your drink."

He did.

"Today I got the results of my amniocentesis exam. Hold on tight, papa, everything's fine with mama, but we're going to have twins, boys, identical twin boys."

At the news, Artie wondered about the expression on his face. Confusion, disbelief, shock, a man going down for the third and last time, some combination of all of these; he thought he felt a large muscle in his left cheek twitch. "You're kidding me," he finally managed to say.

"That's roughly what I said to Doctor Rosenberg. But she wasn't kidding, and I'm afraid I'm not."

"This is going to take a bit of getting used to," Artie said.

"I've known it for six hours now, and I still can't get used to it myself. It may take twenty or thirty years to get used to."

Artie thought of himself in parks, airports, restaurants, pushing one of those wide double strollers, two tow-headed boys its passengers. People would no doubt take him for their grandfather. Would he have the energy to keep up with two boys, identical boys no less? All those diapers, two cribs, two high chairs, endless bottles of formula, Jesus, Artie thought, I am in the damn soup now, up to my lower lip.

"You know," Lindsey said, "you can still get out of this deal. No earnest money has been put down. No papers have been signed. You can still walk, friend, I want you to know that."

"Where would I walk to?" Artie said. "As it happens, I love you, girlie."

"You are screwed up," she said. "I happen to love you too."

Artie lifted his drink. "To the boys," he said.

"And to neurosis," she added.

They clinked glasses.

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That evening, alone in his apartment, Artie took out a sheet of paper, and began a letter:

Dear Dr. Lieberman,

This is to let you know that I am to be the father of twin boys, due in December. I am marrying early next month. I would like you to know that I have thought over all you have said, and decided that, even if it is wise, it's wisdom I cannot use, cannot afford, at least not at this juncture in my life. I admire your confidence and sense of certainty about my life. I wish I had some of it myself, but I don't and probably never will. I am apparently one of those people who have to take things as they come. If anything, I feel I have lived all too carefully over the past years. It hasn't helped. I realize that, at my age, attempting to raise twin boys is really putting myself in for it. But just now—I mean right at this very moment—it seems damn fine to me. It feels like life is calling out to me, one last chance not to live under someone else's tyranny (including, I hope you'll forgive me for saying so, yours), but in a sweet chaos of my own making. Screw it, Dr. Lieberman, but time is running out and if I don't get in the game now, I never will. Please cancel my appointment for next Thursday and for every Tuesday and Thursday thereafter.

Finally, I note that I owe you, for seven sessions, the sum of $980. I have decided not to pay. I've decided you've enough of my money as it is. Besides, I can use the money to buy one of those double strollers and spend the rest on diapers, which probably aren't cheap. If you want to attempt to collect this money, I invite you to turn it over to a collection agency. But I think you should know that I have a terrific lawyer.

Sincerely,
Arthur M. Glick

He signed the letter, in a large and bold hand, Artie.

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ROBERT SCHULTZ

Snowlight

I don't *know* how I feel about you right now." She had stopped next to the sliding glass doors and turned to face him, the baby asleep in her arms. The room was dim and she was hard to see with the glare of the snow behind her. Silhouetted against the flaring brightness, she was a dark space with a voice. "Just don't *ask* me that right now," she said.

There was a long silence. They both stood still in the middle room of their small apartment with snowlight pouring in from the backyard. "I'm going for a drive," he said, finally. He got his keys and his coat and she didn't say anything. He went out.

Paul and Susan owned one nice thing. Two years ago, when they'd been married for six months, Paul's brother had found the car for them on a dealer's lot back home in the Midwest. The small Audi was just a year old, with low mileage, but it had been priced way below blue book since there were no mechanics nearby skilled at working on that particular import. Home to visit their families, Paul and Susan had driven the car while the dealer, a tall hefty man of about sixty, rode along in the back seat, commenting on the tires and the radio. When they returned to the lot and stood next to the car, the dealer buttoned the coat of his gray suit, looked Paul in the eyes, and said, "Well, do you want to buy it?" Paul did not look away. The man's direct gaze and blunt question felt like a challenge, a glove thrown down between them. Paul held the man's gaze and answered back, "Yes, I'll take it." The two men went inside, signed the papers, and Paul wrote out a check for the full amount while Susan sat in the Audi's passenger seat and waited. When Paul came out he slid behind the wheel and steered their new car off the lot. Three blocks later, Susan dropped her face into her hands and began to sob. Paul pulled the car over to the curb.

"What is it?" he said. His nerves had been trilling from writing

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the big check, and his wife's sudden tears sent a fresh wave of adrenaline through him.

"You didn't even ask me," she said, still sobbing. "I want the car, too, but you didn't even ask me. And it was my money. Three years worth of annuities cashed in, and you didn't even ask me."

The realization of what he'd done struck him and he echoed with it like a gong. "Oh, God, I'm sorry, Susan," Paul said. "I'm sorry. I was stupid, just stupid." He knew right away this was something he could never undo, and dread carved out a dark narrow tunnel in his chest.

So it was the midnight blue Audi that Paul backed out of the driveway, now, threw viciously into gear, and steered off through the blinding streets. He drove hard, angry, stung by the intolerable words: "I don't *know* how I feel about you. . . ." Now, of all times, when he most needed her understanding and support. He felt betrayed. Betrayed! He almost spoke the word out loud. It lay just behind his lips, bitter as lemon rind.

He threw the car into a turn, felt the rear end slip on the packed snow, and steered to compensate without letting up on the gas. At the next block he ignored the stop sign. Small, faded houses the colors of Easter eggs flashed by on either side. It was the middle of March in upstate New York and the houses seemed pathetic to him, lodged in the snow like so many children's toys forgotten since fall, emerging now, their color leached by the weather. He made a turn without thinking, wrenching the wheel on a sudden, angry impulse. The spaces between the houses lengthened as he pressed the car through the turns of a winding, two-lane road. Paul saw a small, green sign whip past: Cortland City Limits.

He didn't know where he was going. He was just going away. He made turn after turn, always choosing the smallest and least familiar road. He was in the countryside now, with white fields stretching away on either side. It had snowed for two days—two dark, thickly-overcast days with big flakes swirling like sparks and Paul stalking the apartment, trying to absorb the news of his sudden layoff while Susan tended the baby silently, keeping out of the way. She was too quiet, too much out of the way, Paul had thought. She seemed sullen, as if he had failed her in some unforgivable way, as if some long-suspected fault in him had been revealed at last. But all three of the youngest managers had been

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let go, even Strappler who had straightened out that problem on line three.

The sky had blown clear overnight and now the sunlight thundered off the snowy fields. Paul had forgotten his sunglasses in his rush to leave the apartment and he squinted hard now, half-blinded, his eyes aching. Another turn pointed the car toward a hill with woods. There had been no houses for a long time, but the road had been plowed so that one lane was clear, scraped down to its dirt and gravel. Paul accelerated toward the foot of the hill.

How *did* she feel? Susan rocked and stared through the patio doors at the brilliant yard while little Robert nursed contentedly. The sunlight off the drifts was too much. It made the inside of their half-basement walkout vibrate around her with darkness. She stared and her eyes hurt, but she couldn't look away from the sunlight on the snow. It had been so dark for so long.

From upstairs, the scent of cooking drifted down. The DeAngelos, the retired couple upstairs, were preparing their Sunday dinner. Susan could smell baked potatoes fresh from a hot oven. When the baby was finished nursing, she thought, she would pre-heat her own oven and scrub a potato. Should she scrub one or two? How would it feel to put Robby down for his nap, to place one potato into the oven, and set one place at the small, round table behind her? If she wanted to, she could push the table next to the glass doors and gaze out as she ate, looking out upon the clean, white trackless snow.

A simple potato with a little butter and salt would be fine for her. But if Paul were there he'd want a pork chop, too, and a vegetable, and since it was Sunday, something sweet afterwards. Susan glanced away from the yard and peered toward the door which led to their bedroom, but she couldn't see a thing. Her eyes wouldn't adjust. It was just all black over there.

Paul accelerated into the hill and entered the trees which flashed past on either side of the road. The plow had stopped at the foot of the hill, and Paul steered the slipping car on the two narrow tracks left by another car. Paul concentrated on holding his speed as the hill rose and the snow deepened. The woods became more thick and the hillside fell off steeply to the left of

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the road, which was little more than a driveway or a logging road, now. A house trailer appeared ahead on the right and the tracks Paul had been following emerged from the empty space in front of it. Paul kept going, steering on the unbroken white surface between a shallow ditch on the right and the hillside falling away on the left. The snow was at least five inches deep and deepening. He held the accelerator steady, carrying as much momentum as he could without breaking the tires free to spin. Another trailer appeared on the right, rusty and sagging, with broken blinds cocked sideways in the dark windows. Paul climbed past it on the unmarked snow.

The car slowed as the hill steepened, but the snow tires dug in and kept him climbing. He was holding a steady twenty miles per hour, winding around the hill through the thickening woods, the abandoned trailer disappearing behind him. The car climbed—it was amazing. It just kept going, higher up, deeper in, and farther away. The trees were right up next to the road on both sides, slim gray trunks rising into empty branches that latticed a clear, blue sky. Then the hill steepened more and the car slowed again. "Come on," Paul said out loud, double-clutching to downshift into first. But when he pressed on the gas the front wheels broke free, spun, and sank. The car stopped.

Paul dropped his head back against the headrest, breathed in deeply once, and let the air out slowly. Then he closed his eyes for a long time. When he opened them again the snow-glare slapped him hard so that he had to squint. In the rearview mirror he saw his two narrow tracks curving down behind him. He shifted into reverse, applied the gas gently, and eased out the clutch, but the drive wheels just spun. He shifted from reverse to first and back to reverse, trying to rock himself out, but the wheels spun and sank until he was into the deep snow up to the frame. The drive wheels spun freely, now, bearing no weight at all.

Paul turned off the engine, heard the silence, and looked around at where he was. The perfect surface of the snow stretched up the hillside to his right, down the steep incline to his left, and along the trackless road that continued to rise through the leafless trees ahead of him.

Susan stood at the sink and scrubbed a potato. The open kitchen area where she worked was at one end of the long middle

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room. Behind her, the small round dining table had been pushed near the patio doors and was set with a single plate. At the far end of the room, a couch, a chair, and a floor lamp were arranged as a sitting area. Working at the sink, Susan sensed the glow from the glass doors over her right shoulder. Her eyes had not fully adjusted from having gazed so long into the snowy yard. She could hardly see the potato in her wet hands so she scrubbed it twice as long as she needed to, then wrapped it in foil, poked it several times with a fork, and placed it in the oven. When she turned, the gloom of the apartment and the shimmering light beyond the glass made her feel like a fish looking up from the bottom of a pond. She thought of all those old adventure movies in which the hero escapes by pretending to have drowned while he lies perfectly still underwater breathing through a reed. Her own chest ached as if with the pressure of depth and her breath came in narrow sips, not quite enough air, never quite enough. But in that situation you couldn't panic and thrash and you couldn't gulp. She crossed from the kitchen area to the couch at the other end of the room and sat down. She picked up a magazine but left it unopened on her lap, focusing her attention instead on the louvered doors to her left, listening hard for the sound of Robby's even breathing in the nursery behind them. She heard a sound which she recognized as the corduroy on the knees of his sleeper moving over the surface of his smooth sheet. Then there was a little sigh. Involuntarily, Susan sighed too.

Somewhere else, Susan thought, in the bright world of her former self, others moved with ease and certainty. But now, getting up in the night for the baby's feedings, catching naps in the day between fixing meals or changing diapers, and only getting out for little breaks when Paul could help or when they could find a babysitter, it felt exactly like being underwater. She moved sluggishly these days against an odd resistance. She was tired all the time and things looked strange.

Glancing again toward the glowing patio doors, she felt a sudden, sharp longing for the bright halls and antiseptic scent of Mercy Hospital back home, for her green scrubs and white shoes, for the R.N. pin fixed above her left breast every morning, for her professional form, straight and slim, soothing the gravid woman in the bed. She'd been working in the obstetrics ward, rotating shifts, when she'd met Paul, who had just graduated from college.

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It was summertime. He had a job out East that began in the fall. When she worked evenings—3:00 to 11:00—she went home, made a cup of tea, and waited with the lights out for the click of his bike and the sound of his steps on her porch. When she worked all night he arrived at 7:30 to make her a big breakfast and nap with her for a couple of hours before slipping carefully out of bed without waking her. When she worked early—7:00 A.M. to 3:00—it was she who got up quietly, readied herself for the day, and looked back at his form in her single bed as she eased out the door. They married in August and drove east in her used Ford, pulling a U-Haul trailer with everything they owned inside it.

The last time Susan had been in a hospital was when Robert was born. A nurse like her had stood in a side room on the maternity floor handing Paul fresh basins as Susan threw up into them. Susan sat on a gurney, leaned her head into Paul's shoulder and threw up time after time. Then, with the effort, her water broke and splashed onto the linoleum floor. She felt as big as the world, convulsed with floods. She'd been in intermittent labor for twelve hours, but the contractions were harder now. When they came—about a minute and a half apart—she tried her breathing. She couldn't tell whether it did any good. The pain focused her mind so hard that a part of her consciousness broke free and drifted up into a corner of the room, where it turned and looked back. Below, it saw a man and woman with their heads together, locked arm-over-arm in an exhausted embrace, like two wrestlers near the end of a match.

And then it was time to go into the delivery room. Susan walked the few feet down the hall, leaning against Paul. She heard a peculiar, squishing sound as they went, and she said, "What's that?"

Paul gave her a tired, rueful grin and answered: "It's my shoes. They're filled with your water." A little, tickling bubble had risen inside her then—the beginnings of laughter—but then another contraction began.

Paul opened the door, slid out onto the snow, and sat with his back propped against the side of the car. He looked to his right and left. The car was good and stuck—up to the axles. He registered the fact with an indifference marred only by the slightest edge of satisfaction. Here he was, wherever *here* was. He

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took a deep breath, let it out, and shut his eyes. It felt good to sit still. He'd driven off the sting and anger, driven far enough and reckless enough that he'd lost himself, and now he could just sit still, his mind, for the moment, as blank as the snow, as empty as the trees. He kept his eyes shut and savored the feeling of being at rest. The snow was cold through his pants but the sun off the side of the car warmed his face on both sides. He thought that he could sit that way for a very long time. It felt good to be away, apart, alone—to let it all go.

After a while Paul opened his eyes and squinted against the brilliance. The snow stretched away beneath a perfect blue dome. Interspersed among the hillside's scrubby gray trees he saw a few pines and, at intervals, small groves of hemlocks. He could not see the bottom of the hill or the edge of the woods. If he were to start out walking he could go for miles, he supposed, without running into anything. The thought, once it had formed, expanded into an irresistible impulse. To walk into the woods. How much easier it seemed than anything else he could imagine at that moment! So he stood up and started down the hill, shuffling ragged lines into the deep snow as he went.

The cool air in his lungs and the movement of his limbs cheered him. Sure he was cold. The backs of his legs were wet and the loafers he'd thrown on as he left the apartment were already filled with snow. But the space around his body seemed to vibrate with elasticity. He strode ahead for several minutes. It was easy to walk downhill, even though the snow reached above his knees in some spots. It was a light, downy snow that kicked up ahead of his legs with each step like the froth of a receding wave. His eyes ached, though, almost as much as his cold feet and legs.

Paul stopped, leaned against one of the gray trunks, and looked back over his shoulder. The dark blue Audi already appeared small—about the size of a chicklet—against the white expanse surrounding it. Paul turned and looked ahead. Scrub trees stretched in every direction, the snow a blank sheet between them. There was no reason to go one way or another. Every place was the same cold place.

Paul leaned his face against the tree trunk and shut his eyes against the light. His feet were numb, but his eyes still ached. He breathed in the scent of tree bark and felt the smooth texture against his face. There was a rough place and Paul opened his

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eyes. Where his cheek had been, he saw a black spot on the trunk—coarse, involuted folds packed in a blemish the size of a silver dollar. Probably a bug had burrowed in and laid its eggs, he thought. Paul shut his eyes and leaned against the tree again.

He leaned with his eyes closed and his shoes filled with snow and remembered the evening several months earlier—before Robby had been born—when he had baked a chicken and two potatoes for supper. He had set two places at the small, round dining table and called Susan. She came out of the bedroom, where she'd been resting, and eased herself into the chair. The pregnancy tired her, especially after the kidney infection. She'd spiked a high fever and had such pains in her back that when he'd reached out to help her walk across the parking lot to the hospital emergency room she pulled away and pleaded, "No, don't touch me!" She was admitted and the doctors cleared up the infection in a few days with heavy doses of antibiotics. After that, she was told she had to continue with the antibiotics and drink eight glasses of water every day for the rest of the pregnancy. It scared Paul beyond anything he'd had to endure before. The fever, the infection, and then all those drugs—it couldn't be good for the baby. He thought about it every day for the next six months. Terrible fears ran like underground rivers just below the surface of his conscious thinking. When they sprang to mind at odd moments, spurting up hard, his scalp tingled and then he broke out in a light, cold sweat. But he never spoke of this. He didn't want to upset Susan—she must have been worried, too. And, anyway, what could they do but wait and hope?

When Susan had arranged herself at the table—three months after the kidney infection—Paul brought the chicken over and the two potatoes. He placed one potato on Susan's plate and one on his own, then started to slice the breast meat from the chicken. As Paul served the chicken, Susan cut her potato in two. Paul glanced up, saw it, and his hands stopped with the carving fork and knife in midair. The potato was black inside, rotten. The skin had been perfect, and the outer quarter inch was white and firm, like any potato. But inside that ring was a black collapsed space, pulpy and misshapen like the rotted meat inside a bad walnut.

Paul whisked Susan's plate away and scraped the awful thing into the garbage. Then he returned to the table, cut his own potato in two—this one was fine—and placed half on Susan's

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plate. She said, "Thank you," tiredly, and they ate in silence. The incident hadn't seemed to affect Susan, but Paul could barely maintain his composure. He felt like a medieval peasant who had just seen a terrible portent. Inside, he was wild with dread. His lips and fingertips tingled and he felt dizzy. But he controlled himself for Susan's sake and ate methodically, one bite after another, willing himself to imitate a man having dinner with his wife on any ordinary evening. Moment after moment and day after day for the next three months—those three long months!—he imitated an adult husband, composed and expectant, awaiting with his wife the blessed arrival of their first child.

Susan sat at the table next to the glass doors, buttered and salted her potato, and gazed out into the backyard. It was such a relief when Robby took a good nap. His needs were endless. And then Paul had needs, too. Susan took a deep breath and tried to conjure the revery she sometimes fell into at night just before sleep. In it, she felt herself suspended, floating in an amber light, buoyed and drifting. It was blissful—that sensation of escape and ease. She would like to be able to produce it deliberately, as a relief from the endless waves of duty and fatigue. Surely her own mother—a fountain of cheer and sensible views—had not felt this way when Susan was a baby. The thought flooded her with guilt.

The sunlight off the snow flew at her in sheets. It was becoming too much. She closed her eyes and pressed the heels of her hands against them until she saw sparks in the blackness. She felt guilty about what she'd said to Paul too, but she'd only told the truth. What an extraordinary and dangerous thing it was—to speak the truth in marriage! But she truly didn't know what she felt about anything these days. She didn't *feel*—unless fatigue and duty and guilt counted. But he'd taken it wrong. She hadn't meant it in a sweeping way for all time. Somewhere out beyond her reach, the old feelings must be there, the right feelings—energy and competence, love for her husband and her son. The word "love" floated up like a red balloon into an empty sky.

Susan opened her eyes and had to turn away from the blinding light. She walked to the bedroom and lay down in the dark. The small half-windows near the ceiling were covered with heavy curtains so that only a dispersed glow showed at the edges. She thought again of her mother. "Sometimes you have to know what

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not to tell," she had said once. It had thrilled Susan. She was eight, and the two of them stood in the garage over the failed birthday cake her mother had dumped into the garbage can. They were co-conspirators in a plot to deceive her father in the name of love. They would go to the bakery in the grocery store, buy a ready-made cake, and re-frost it themselves in their homemade style. "He'll never know about our little accident," her mother had said, with a wink.

What Susan couldn't tell Paul was her secret gladness that he had been laid off. Didn't that mean everything would have to change? Everything would be new—a new town, a new apartment. Maybe she would go back to work. This ceiling that she stared at in the dim bedroom—it would be swept away. If there were a fire in the apartment right now, she thought, she wouldn't care if it took everything. She could scoop up Robby, run out into the snow, and keep going. She could start over. She *longed* to start over. Things had become so dark and tangled, so different from the life of blissful companionship she and Paul had planned with such excitement as they resisted the voices which came from all around: "You're too young." "What's the hurry?" "Be sure." "Marriage is a big step."

She could start over. But even without Paul? What if *he* kept going, never came back? Her mind came to a still point, poised within the question. Could she start over without Paul? Did she want to? There was something luxurious about lying on the bed in the dark and considering the possibility, something relaxing in looking straight at the forbidden question. The walls of the room seemed to step back, the ceiling lift. She took a deep breath and blew it out, savoring it like a smoker. Her mind relaxed, honeyed. Yes, she thought, she could start over, begin anew, even without Paul, if it came to that. For months—from the middle of her pregnancy until now—it had been like he was *already* gone. He'd been distant, preoccupied, absent. And as he'd grown more distant, she'd pulled back, too. Yes, she could do it. How odd it was to imagine such a thing! Were these feelings real or just a mood she'd fallen into? Thinking this way, Susan felt like a different person, a stranger to herself, someone who could do anything.

A light wind swished through the trees and Paul shivered.

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There was a stand of hemlocks off to his right and he walked toward it for shelter. The black-green boughs of the closely set trees made a cove of shadows. The lower branches swept near to the ground, so he had to stoop and part them with his arms to step inside. He moved to the middle of the grove and felt the muscles around his eyes relax. The outer branches sashayed with the wind, producing a sound like rustling skirts, but the air was still where he stood and leaned his back against one of the big trunks. It was dark and lovely there. His eyes did not ache anymore. The darkness was restful and calming. That was probably why the delivery room had been so dimly lit.

It had been the middle of the night. Susan had been in labor on and off since before sunrise of the previous day. He had stood next to Susan's head and stroked her hair. Her dilation was slow and the baby was turned the wrong way, facedown instead of faceup. Like a drowned man. No, he had it backwards. The baby was supposed to be facedown for the delivery, but was the other way. He realized how tired he was—couldn't think straight—and he tried to push all thought away.

After two more hours of ineffective contractions, the obstetrician decided to give her something to speed the labor. Paul smoothed Susan's forehead. Beneath his pale green gown his pant legs, shoes, and socks were soaking wet. Earlier, in a side room, while Susan convulsed and gushed, he'd gripped her and stood his ground. It was the bravest he'd ever been, he thought, but it had been nothing like what Susan herself was going through. How much longer could she hold up?

"Ah, the baby's turned," the doctor said.

"She's exhausted," said one of the nurses. It had been a confidential aside to the doctor, but Paul had heard.

"Okay," the doctor replied. "I think this is going to be a mid-forceps delivery. Let's go ahead." And then he spoke louder, to Paul and Susan: "I think we're about ready. I'm just going to help things along a little with some instruments."

When the next contraction started, both nurses urged Susan: "Push hard now. Give it everything. Push that baby out!" Susan puffed and strained and puffed.

Paul leaned low by Susan's ear and repeated over and over the first thing that came into his head: "You can do it. You can do it." When the contraction passed, one of the nurses, the blond one,

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said, "Relax now. We can see the top of the baby's head. The next one might do it."

A few seconds later Susan said, "Here it comes," and she flexed herself up into a half-sitting position, panting and straining. Her face turned deep red and she let out a low, animal sound. Then there were quick motions at the other end, and suddenly the doctor lifted a dark mass, smeared with blood and vernix, and laid it on Susan's belly. Paul stepped toward it. "I did it. I did it," Susan repeated, spent and astonished. Paul looked and reached out his right hand, then stopped it in mid-gesture.

"It's all right. You can touch him," said the brown-haired nurse. "We'll check him over in just a minute, but he seems fine. Look at all that long, dark hair!" Paul's hand trembled as he put it on the small, wet head matted with thick, black hair. The child squirmed and kicked and the nurses smiled.

They took him to a side table, did some quick tests and cleaned him up, while the doctor attended to the last matters of the delivery. In a few minutes Paul and Susan were alone in the warm, dim room with the baby at Susan's side. Susan gazed and cooed and offered her breast. The boy found the nipple and took it as if at that early moment he had discovered the entire purpose of his life. He sucked with such vigor and gusto that Paul and Susan both laughed until tears streamed down their faces. They wept with the pure relief and gratitude of a couple lost at sea and finally recovered. The hospital in the night seemed a great, lit ship, and they thrummed with it now, delivered, safe—all three of them.

Paul cracked a small branch from the tree, crushed its needles in his hand, and smelled the clean scent of turpentine. Then he stripped branch after branch from the hemlocks and laid them in a pile. When he'd broken off all he could carry he bent down and scooped them up in his arms, a large, prickly bundle. Then he stepped out of the grove back into the blinding light and headed for the car. As he climbed through the snow with his awkward load, Paul planned it all out. There was a tire iron in the trunk. He could use that to dig out around the tires, the axles, and the frame. He'd have to dig deep around the tires, then pack the hemlock boughs under them so the tires would have something to grip. It would take a long time, but he could start the car and warm himself, first. And there was plenty of daylight left. He

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would warm himself for a few minutes, then dig away the snow and pack the evergreens around the tires. The traction of the matted boughs would get him started and then the road was downhill all the way back to where he could turn around.

When Robby cried, Susan went to him, lifted him out of the crib and placed him on the changing table. The boy looked up at her from the green table pad decorated with white daisies and cooed as she changed him. When he was clean and dry and freshly dressed, she took him out to the middle room and bundled him in his hooded snowsuit, then wrapped one of her own scarves around his face so that only his eyes peeked out. When she laid him on the floor to put on her coat the boy blinked in the harsh light that streamed through the patio doors and spread across the carpet. Susan threw on her red woolen coat, picked up her child, and slid the glass door open.

The backyard shimmered and glared—a flat disc of blinding light extending to a split-rail fence that curved along the lot line. The property, at the town's edge, bordered an undeveloped stretch of woods. Beyond the dark gash of the fence, empty limbs of big hardwoods arched above a scrabble of low brush. Susan walked through the unmarked snow to the fence and stopped.

She gazed into the woods. Under the big trees, patches of brush spread back to a second fence—rusted wire that rose and sagged between leaning metal posts—then the undergrowth extended on into the thickening woods. Susan looked as far as she could see. At the farthest reach of her vision, the tangled gray of patchy brush merged like a fog.

Perhaps there was a slight movement off to the side and nearby. Susan didn't really know why she turned to her right and looked. But there it was, suddenly, as if it had just risen out of the ground—a slight, long-eared doe looking directly at her. It couldn't have been more than thirty feet away, beyond the rail fence and behind a low gray bush. It stood, its ears up and alert, and stared at her. The woman and the deer stood perfectly still and took each other in. Susan could see the brown, slender neck, the white muzzle, the long narrow forehead, and the two eyes trained on her, deep and round and otherworldly.

Slowly Susan turned Robby from her shoulder to face outward. She whispered, "Look, there, the deer. Can you see it?" At the

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movement, the doe took a step, hesitated, then sprang away. It cleared a small bush with a first jump, wove between others in a graceful, leaning canter, then bounded over the far fence with a leap in which the animal seemed to hang motionless for a moment, poised above the wire as if gravity had been suspended, then the deer extended its forelegs down and its hind legs up to complete an arc so beautiful it forced the air out of Susan's chest with an involuntary, "Ahhh . . . ."

She looked for a long time after the animal had disappeared into the woods. Then she turned and followed her own footsteps through the snow back to the apartment. Inside, she removed Robby's coat and placed him in his playpen with his favorite toys. Then she took off her coat, tossed it over the back of a chair, and went to the bedroom. In the dark of the closet she found the suitcase, placed it on the bed, and opened it. She turned to the dresser, pulled a drawer, chose quickly from among its contents, and placed her things in the suitcase. She moved down the chest of drawers, selecting carefully, then turned to the closet. She plucked five dresses from their places, folded them, and added them to the suitcase. She found her cosmetics bag on the top shelf in the closet and carried it to the bathroom. There, as she reached for the pull on the medicine cabinet, she saw the woman in the mirror. Around the face, thick brown hair swept back in tangles. The mouth was set, its lips pursed. The eyes were wide open, almost startled-looking, but with a depth in their dark brown which tunneled back to a distant source. Susan hesitated, looking at the woman in the mirror, poised and weightless.

Paul steered the Audi on the clean, two-lane blacktop that headed back toward the city limits. He was wet and tired, but the heat blew steadily out of the vents and enveloped him in an atmosphere of well-being. The road was bordered on both sides by a thick pine woods, the car hummed with tuned precision, and Paul felt purged and calmed.

He rounded a bend, saw a small knot of traffic ahead, and applied the brakes. One car, in his lane, was pulled halfway onto the shoulder, as far as the piled snow would allow. Another car was waiting to get around it while oncoming traffic passed slowly by. Paul approached the stopped car—a light blue Ford sedan about ten years old—and pulled onto the shoulder a few yards

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behind it. A woman stood by the open trunk, searching for something. Flat tire, Paul thought, and she's getting out her spare tire and jack. He turned off his engine, opened the door, and swung out to help. As he did he saw the woman straighten up and walk toward the front of her car. She carried in her right hand a hunting knife with a gleaming eight-inch blade.

Paul stopped and craned his neck to see. The woman strode past her car to a deer lying on its side in the right lane of the road. Paul moved forward. Maybe there was something he should do. When he got to the front of the woman's car she was standing over the deer. It was trying to lift its head, and its front legs moved as if to run through the air. The hind quarters lay inert in a pool of blood.

The woman was his age, thick and strong-looking. Her dark brown hair streamed over the shoulders of her light brown coat. She wore jeans and hiking boots. Paul was about to speak when she leaned forward, grasped the deer gently but firmly under its chin with her left hand, and lifted its head. She noticed Paul then and said, "Stay back." And then she cut the animal's throat with a single, sure stroke. It struggled harder for a moment, blood surging from the neck onto the woman's coat, jeans, and boots. But she held the head firmly, dropped the knife from her right hand, and stroked the deer's forehead as its life ebbed quickly away. Paul stared, rooted where he stood.

There was shouting off to his left. Paul turned and saw a contorted face leaning out the window of a passing car. The man yelled angrily at the woman who stood over the deer, smeared with blood. Paul could not make out what he said though the words were clear. It was as though Paul's senses had stopped working. They still took things in—the sounds, the images, the smell of exhaust fumes and blood—but with no meanings attached.

"I could use a hand now." It was the woman. Paul looked at her. "If we each take a leg I think we can drag her off the road." She looked at him and he finally understood. Paul shook himself and stepped forward. He grasped a slim ankle above the hoof and the two of them worked to drag the deer to the roadside, over the crest of snow thrown up by the plow, and down into the ditch. The deer was surprisingly heavy.

Finally they stood in the white ditch next to the dead animal.

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Their tracks climbed off to Paul's left with a streak of blood staining the snow in a vivid line. He looked at the woman's broad face and gray eyes, searching for emotion. He saw no tears. The woman did not seem to be shaken. She looked back at him with a level gaze which shocked him with its composure. "Somebody hit her and just kept going," she said. "Didn't care if she took an hour to die. Didn't care if other cars ran off the road dodging her." Then she turned and walked back toward the road and Paul followed.

She retrieved her knife and walked toward the back of her car. Paul continued to follow her and noticed for the first time two big dogs sitting in the Ford's back seat. They were Dobermans and they sat on their haunches, side by side, their ears up, alert—so still and so similar they looked ceremonial.

The woman found a towel in the trunk and wiped the blade. Then she wiped her coat, pants, and boots the best she could, but she was covered with blood. Paul had followed, and he finally managed to speak: "Is there anything else I can do?"

The woman turned to him and said, "I was on my way to visit somebody. I'll have to go home and clean up, now. You'll probably get to a phone before I do. You could call and say I'll be late."

"Sure," Paul said. "Where should I call?"

She told him the number and Paul turned and walked back to the Audi. At the door he stopped and called out, "And I should know your name."

"Diana," she called back.

Paul started the car, pulled around the light blue Ford, and continued toward the town. He stared at the receding car in his rearview mirror until it was no longer in sight. Then he saw his own face in the mirror and the smear of blood on one cheek. There was nothing to wipe it with so he continued toward home, the stain drying and tightening on his face.

When she heard the door open Susan was sitting on the floor in the dim bedroom playing with Robby. The suitcase with her things in it lay open on the bed. She heard Paul use the phone briefly and then hang up, but she couldn't make out the words. Then Paul called out, "Susan?"

She didn't answer, but she held up the ring of brightly colored

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plastic keys for Robby and shook them. The boy smiled and reached for them, and Susan heard Paul's footsteps as he came through the apartment. When she sensed Paul in the doorway, she looked up. His pants and shoes were soaked through and there was a dark smear on one of his cheeks. She saw his gaze move from the two of them on the floor to the half-packed suitcase and back to Susan.

"What happened?" Susan said. "What's on your face?" He looked like he might be in shock.

Paul wiped the back of his hand across his cheek and some of the dark smear flaked off. He stepped forward, reached for Robby, and picked him up. "There was a deer," he said.

Susan stood up. "Did you hit it?" She reached out and rubbed her thumb across Paul's cheek. She saw that the stain was blood but there was no visible wound. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

"No," Paul said. "I didn't hit the deer." She waited for an explanation, but he didn't continue. She saw the stunned, bewildered look in his eyes. He shifted Robby from one arm to the other and glanced back to the bed and the half-packed suitcase. "What are you doing?" he asked.

Susan couldn't think what to say. The only thing that came to mind was an image. "There was a deer," she said, echoing him. It sounded funny to say. His eyes widened and searched her face. "I'll tell you and then you tell me," she said. Then she took him by the sleeve and led him to the middle room and the table flooded with snowlight.

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JOYCE ZONANA

Nell and I

In West Philadelphia's Clark Park, a shabby collection of trees and benches in a once-grand neighborhood—and across the street from a city public health clinic—looms a life-sized bronze statue of Charles Dickens, comfortably seated in a large armchair atop a five-foot red granite base. Below the author is another figure, a just-adolescent girl who steadfastly looks up at him, one arm resting on his pedestal, the other at her side. The girl is "Little Nell," the celebrated heroine of Dickens' 1840-41 serial novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop.* She is gracefully poised on delicate feet, with long hair, a sturdy body, a simple dress, and a face expressing calm devotion to the writer who looks serenely down at her. For nine years in the seventies and eighties, I lived just a few blocks from *Dickens and Little Nell,* taking daily walks along or in Clark Park. Yet in all that time I never paused to look carefully at either the girl or her creator.

For most of those years, "Little Nell" was just a name to me, a vague and somewhat distasteful name, evoking images of saccharine sweetness and sentimentality. I didn't know her story and, I told myself, I didn't want to know it—though I remembered having heard that readers loved her so much that church bells rang throughout England when the installment detailing her death was published. In New York, the dock had been crowded with readers waiting for the latest number: "Is Nell dead?" they clamored. Although I was a passionate student of nineteenth-century British literature, Nell was one cultural icon I wanted to ignore. The oddity of a statue representing an author and his character as equally tangible mortal beings merely served to underscore the naiveté of the Victorians. Resolutely, I turned away.

Now, more than a decade after having left Philadelphia, I find myself yearning for that statue in its obscure corner on South 43rd Street. Now, I'd like to get up close to it, study it well,

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perhaps even touch it. Nell figures in my dreams and meditations, my conversations and my teaching. I want to understand her, to know how and why she captured the imagination of her time, to know what it was about this fictional child that made grown men weep at her fictional death. I want to know why she was so popular in her day and why she has been so forgotten in ours; I want to know what Dickens was doing in this novel and what happened to the people who read it. Nell's story is suddenly important to me because I know now that she has always been important to me. I've discovered that she has been lodged in my unconscious for nearly forty years and thus to know her is to know a central aspect of myself. And, because I'm convinced that the outline if not the detail of my own story is not unique, I suspect that Nell—or someone very like her—figures in the imaginations of many other readers as well.

When I was ten, living with my parents, my younger brother, and my paternal grandmother in a two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, I had an experience of reading that has resonated ever since as my most complete immersion in a fictional world. Although for many years I could recall neither the characters nor the plot of the novel that gave me this experience, I remembered with hallucinatory intensity finding the book at the Bath Beach Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. I discovered it wedged on a shelf in the lower-left corner of the adult fiction section. At ten or so, was I already allowed to check out adult books? Or was the librarian, knowing my love for reading, letting me pass? I can't say. The book was illustrated with old engravings, I know that, and the volume I took home was thick and yellowed, with well-rubbed, velvety-soft pages bound in a nubby hard cover.

What happened when I began to read was something that had never happened before, and that hasn't happened in quite the same way since: I was possessed, entering the book without reserve and allowing it to enter me. It was as if the novel provided a seamless, completely unself-conscious passage into its world; I left my ordinary reality behind and lived utterly in that of its characters. I was both lost and found in its pages, alive with an intensity unavailable in my day-to-day life, safe in the sure progress of its narration. I read without stopping, transported, absorbed.

For years afterward, I was haunted by this memory of passion-

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ate, deep reading. I told myself I wanted to read the book again, but because I knew neither author nor title, I also told myself it would be impossible to find. I never went back to the little library on Bath Avenue to discover what books were shelved in the lower-left-hand section. Nor did I reason that the author's last name must start with a letter at the beginning of the alphabet. I simply dreamed, and occasionally picked up a book with old engravings, looking for a picture of an antique store. I remembered that much: the book had something to do with an antique store. I also vaguely remembered a girl and gambling. Yet for all my desire to re-experience the novel, I never asked anyone if they knew of such a book, nor did I engage in any systematic exploration.

I realize now that in fact I was quite happy to keep the identity of my great book a mystery, a numinous archetype of reading, mythic and unattainable. For what would I have done if I had found *The Old Curiosity Shop* too soon, how would I have come to terms with its intensity of emotion? Even today, I am often in tears as I write this essay, my breath suddenly stopped as I realize one and then another way in which Nell's story is mine. What would I have done if I had found her too soon?

Laughed at her, probably, as in fact I did when, in graduate school, I deduced that *The Old Curiosity Shop* must be the book that haunted me. I had been reading about Dickens while taking a course in nineteenth-century British fiction. Some description of the novel struck me—I recognized the young girl, an old man, the antique store—and I realized that this must be the book that had so deeply affected me as a child. I borrowed a copy from the Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania and took a look. What I found, to my dismay, was a vapidly sentimental and mawkish tale. Yes, this was the book of my childhood, and what a pathetic book it was. What an absurd plot! What an idealized, victimized heroine! Scornfully, with all the superiority of a Ph.D. candidate, I dismissed the novel—and my child-self.

Ten years passed, bringing me to New Orleans, a city as dark as Dickens' London, as crammed with curiosities as the shop that is Nell's home. Talking one afternoon with a therapist, I recalled the book that had offered the most complete escape from the pain of my childhood home. "Going away" was what I called my propensity to abandon reality for the consolations of an ideal realm of dream and fantasy. "Dissociation," Eileen said to me,

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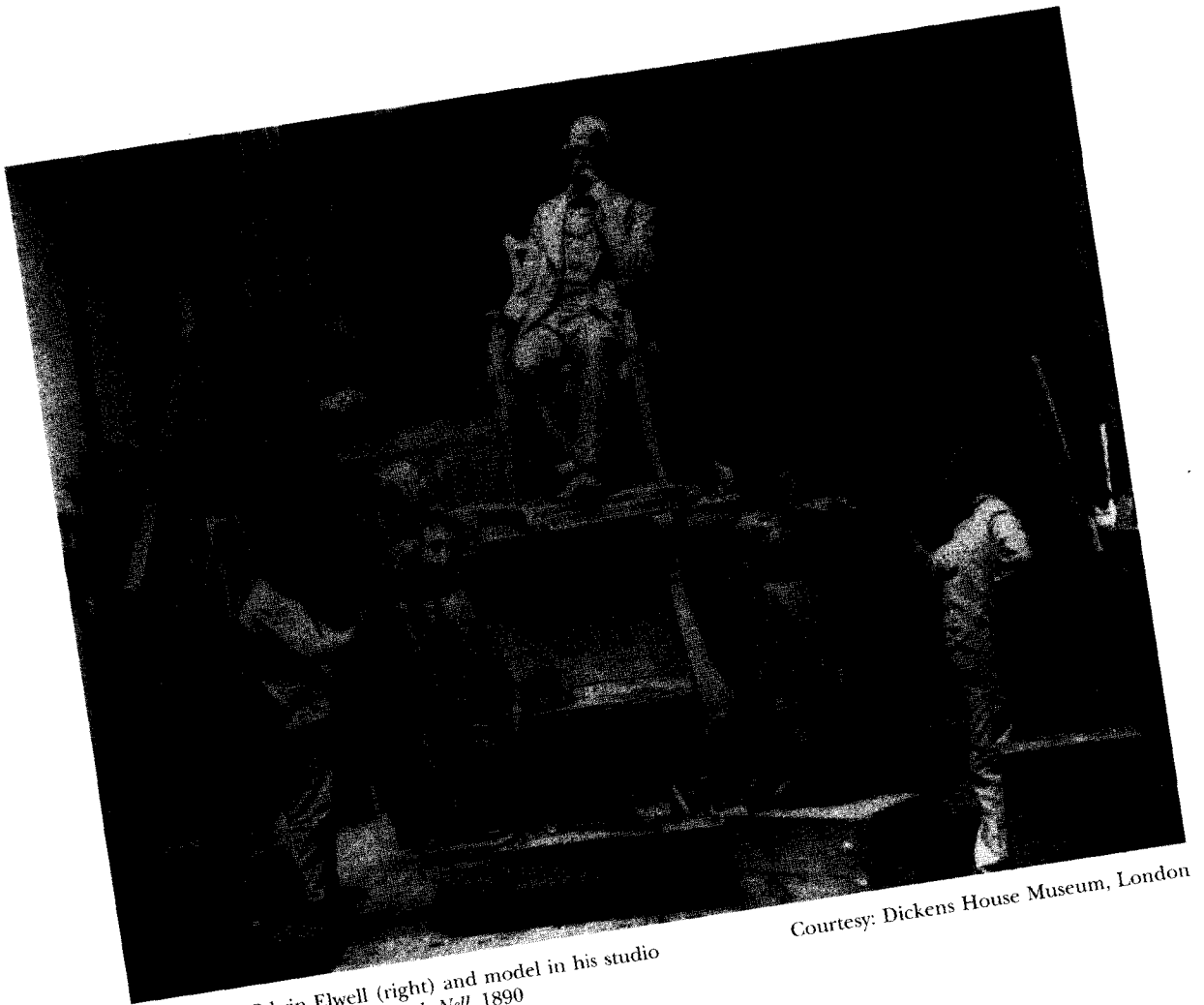

Artist Frank Edwin Elwell (right) and model in his studio with the statue *Dickens and Little Nell*, 1890

Courtesy: Dickens House Museum, London

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"splitting." We were talking about when and how this tendency began, and what I might do now to counteract it. And I remembered *The Old Curiosity Shop.* "So," Eileen asked, "have you read it lately?" "I read it a few years ago," I muttered, "and it's really dumb." "Well," she blandly replied, "I guess you need to read it again." And she insisted that, this time, I buy myself a copy. Two days later I purchased the illustrated paperback that in its turn is now well-worn and tattered.

The Old Curiosity Shop is a classic early Dickens novel, featuring an innocent orphan, grotesque and predatory adults, a frightening city, an idyllic countryside, and a variety of wildly comic incidents that flesh out a grandly tragic story. Little Nell, the heroine, is introduced as a "pretty little girl," a "child" of indeterminate age who lives alone in London with her grandfather Trent. In the second chapter readers learn that Nell "will be a woman soon" and that an "elderly" dwarf of "remarkably hard features and forbidding aspect" hopes to make her his "little cherry-cheeked, red-lipped wife." In the seventh chapter it is at last revealed that Nell is "nearly fourteen"—a "fine girl of her age, but small"—though she continues to be called a child throughout the novel.

From the first, Nell is a focus for other people's fantasies—most of which center around her status as an attractive virgin who will inherit her grandfather's supposed wealth. Poised on the verge of an adulthood she will never reach, Nell evokes the pecuniary and sexual desires of men who visualize her as simultaneously younger and older than she is. Nell will "become the sole inheritor of the wealth of this rich old hunks" affirms her brother Fred to the friend he hopes will marry her and split the wealth with him. "Such a fresh, blooming, modest little bud," leers the dwarf Quilp, "such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell."

Even Nell's grandfather, her guardian, sees her only through the lens of his own desire. Wanting her to become a "fine lady," safe from the "rough mercies of the world," he spends his nights feverishly gambling, compulsively borrowing money from Quilp in the hope of winning a fortune for his granddaughter. "She shall be rich one of these days, and a fine lady" he insists, even as he slips more completely into Quilp's eager grasp.

Very late in the novel, Trent's younger brother reveals the

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background of the old man's destructive obsession. In their youth, the two brothers loved the same woman. The younger brother, feeling beholden to the elder, left town without revealing his feelings so that the elder might marry. This Trent did, but his wife died shortly after bearing a daughter. Raised by Trent, this child in whom "the mother lived again," grows up to marry an abusive and shiftless man; after his early death, she dies as well, leaving two orphaned children—the infant Nell, who resembles her mother and grandmother, and her brother Fred. When Fred gets into financial trouble and goes to sea, Trent becomes haunted by fears of "poverty and want" for Nell. He decides that he can make a fortune gambling, and so he becomes obsessed, increasingly out of touch with everything else—including the child he purports to love.

When the elderly narrator of *The Old Curiosity Shop* first meets Nell at the beginning of the novel, he is walking through London late at night. She is returning from Quilp's house, where she has been sent by Trent to borrow more money. Before describing their encounter, the narrator analyzes his habit of solitary nocturnal walks. He then evokes the desolation of Covent Garden Market at dawn, a place notorious in mid-Victorian London for prostitution, and he laments the exploitation of young women, "shrinking from the hot hands of drunken purchasers." When Nell approaches him, he is struck by her exposure and vulnerability. His "curiosity" aroused, he accompanies her home instead of simply giving directions. As he does so, he tells himself that his intentions are honorable, though he suggests the possibility that they might not be. "As I had felt pleased at first by her confidence," he asserts, "I determined to deserve it."

The narrator is horrified to find where Nell lives—"one of those receptacles for old and curious things which seem to crouch in odd corners of this town." A jumble of "fantastic carvings" and "distorted figures," it houses "strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams." The narrator's description of the shop is an apt description of the novel itself: it is a book designed in dreams and apprehended by the reader's dream-consciousness. Perhaps this is why I could remember so little of it from my first reading: "designed in dreams," the book entered directly into my own, passing through my conscious self with little evident trace.

Disturbed to learn that Nell lives alone in the curiosity shop

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with her "haggard" grandfather, the narrator becomes haunted by images of the "old dark murky rooms—the gaunt suits of mail with their ghostly silent air—the faces all awry, grinning from wood and stone." Fearing that some harm will come to the child, but unable to intervene, he returns to his own cosy fireside where he dreams all night of "the beautiful child" sleeping in such an "uncongenial place."

The first illustration in the novel, of Nell asleep in her tiny room at the shop, perfectly figures forth what many have taken to be the allegorical shape of this novel: of youthful feminine innocence threatened by decaying masculine corruption. It is the determining image, the central picture I retained without knowing it during the years when I remembered nothing of the novel's plot or characters. "A girl and an antique shop," I knew that—and when, finally, I held the book in my hands again, it was by this picture that I knew it.

In the drawing by Samuel Williams, one of four illustrators of the first edition, Nell sleeps peacefully on a high bedstead in a small room crowded with misshapen and mismatched objects: a crucifix, a coat of armor, leering masks, contorted statues, clocks, broken columns, pictures, architectural fragments, a huge candlestick, a mirror. Nell is at the center of a threatening vortex: many of the objects appear to be alive, focusing their malevolent energy against her. The engraving is dark, composed of closely spaced fine lines; much of it is simply black. The only clear space is Nell's face and pillow and the wall just above her head.

From age seven to fourteen, I shared a room with my father's mother, my grandmother known to us as "Nona"—a personage as grotesque to me then as any of the curiosities in Nell's life. Born in Aleppo in a large Jewish family and raised in Cairo, Nona had married young and borne three boys to her merchant husband. (Her second child had been a girl, dead in infancy.) When her husband died suddenly during a typhoid epidemic, she was emotionally and financially devastated. She went to live with her mother-in-law, and devoted herself to raising the children who must have reminded her of her dead spouse. When these sons grew up, the elder and the younger moved away: Isaac to work in a bank in upper Egypt, Ezra to found a kibbutz in Israel. Felix, the middle son, remained at home in Cairo, taking a civil service post in the court system.

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When Felix—the man who would become my father—married at thirty, Nona accompanied him and my mother on their honeymoon, demanding that she be given a trousseau to match the young bride's. When the couple set up housekeeping, Nona moved in with them, possessively guarding her son. My mother, taught by her mother that she must accept her fate with good grace, acquiesced in what was to become an increasingly destructive arrangement. I have been told that in the early months of my parents' marriage, Nona would sit every night on the floor outside their bedroom door and moan, crying that she had been abandoned by her two other sons, that she was desolate. She would continue until my father opened the door and came out to console her. When my mother—against all odds—became pregnant with me and had to spend the pregnancy off her feet, Nona tormented her with foods she knew she did not like.

In 1951, afraid of increasing anti-Semitism, my parents emigrated to the U.S., leaving Nona behind in Cairo with Isaac and his family. In 1956, the rest of the family arrived in the States; Felix once again took Nona in, and with my parents she remained until one year before her death in 1976.

The room that Nona and I shared was small. Our single beds were no more than four feet apart, and the only window looked out on a brick wall. During those years Nona was in her late sixties and early seventies, a pale, ungainly woman who never left the house alone. Every day she would sit on the living room couch and weep to the accompaniment of Middle Eastern music, lamenting the losses she had endured: her husband, her two sons, her daughter, her homeland. When she wasn't crying, she would sit, steadily and silently watching the activity around her. I grew to fear her eyes, to feel them on me wherever I went and no matter what I did. Because I was a girl and not a boy, because I resembled my mother and not my father, because I was filled with the excitement of growing up in America, I was anathema to this immobile, angry woman, who longed for a past to which she could not return.

Yet even as I cringed from Nona's disapproving and angry gaze, I also found myself fascinated and horrified by what I saw of her—unable to turn my eyes away. Every night, before sleep, she removed a flesh-colored foam pad she had stuffed into the left side of her large brassiere. The pad covered the flat surface where her breast had been; on the other side, a loose breast sagged.

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Next, she would take from her mouth a set of false teeth, dropping them into a dented metal cup filled with water and placed on a shaky folding table beside her bed. The teeth would clatter against the metal, then come to rest, glistening an eery pink and white beneath the water. These were her nightly rituals, performed always when I was in the room; in the morning, transfixed, I would watch again as the parts were returned to their places.

During these years, I had one frequently recurring dream:

> I am being pursued by a lion across a wide, barren plain. I come to the plain's edge; it is as if this were the edge of the world, for there is only a vertical drop of terrifying height. I can see no bottom. And I am confronted with a choice: either stop and be mauled by the lion or jump and meet my death. I am paralyzed with fear, unable to choose.

Most nights I would wake in the midst of a fall: I never faced the lion.

In a painted wooden toy chest on my side of the room I kept a rubber witch's mask, green and wrinkled, with a long nose and curly black hair. This witch's face terrorized me: I would cry when I saw it, cowering in fear. I tried to keep it buried beneath my other toys—board games and building blocks—but occasionally it would surface, grinning at me grotesquely from the top of the pile. My brother would often tease me with the mask, pulling it out to shake in my face. Once, he put it on and chased me around the apartment; he had to be stopped by my parents while I cried uncontrollably. Yet despite my horror of it, I never threw this mask away. It served as a necessary focus for my fears—an objective correlative that allowed me to cry. If I could not run shrieking from Nona, I could at least run from my mask. Every day I shuddered to remember it lying in wait for me within the toy chest—even as I strove not to think about the false breast, the false teeth, and the grotesque, decaying body on the other side of the room from me.

Nell too is a child surrounded by fears, simultaneously frightened of and fascinated by a grotesquely menacing world. Although the idealizing narrator imagines that she has "light and sunny dreams" amidst the "fantastic things huddled together" in the curiosity shop, Nell's reality is quite different. Looking out her window at dusk, she fancies "ugly faces that were frowning over at

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her and trying to peer into the room"; these "hideous faces" mingle "with her dreams," and she lives in constant dread of some dark catastrophe. Quilp is "a perpetual nightmare" to Nell, who is "constantly haunted by a vision of his ugly face and stunted figure." Thinking about her grandfather, whom she sees sinking into the "despondent madness" caused by his gambling and indebtedness, she wonders:

> If he were to die—if sudden illness had happened to him, and he were never to come home again, alive—if, one night, he should come home, and kiss and bless her as usual, and after she had gone to bed and had fallen asleep and was perhaps dreaming pleasantly, and smiling in her sleep, he should kill himself and his blood come creeping, creeping on the ground to her own bed-room door—

The catastrophe Nell anticipates appears to come when Quilp takes possession of the shop, "coil[s] himself" into Nell's "little bed," and evicts her and her grandfather. Yet this is not the disaster it seems. "Let us wander barefoot through the world, rather than linger here," Nell urges, and the old man, reduced to a state of childish dependency, agrees. Departing London without plan or provision, the "two poor adventurers" set forth, determined to escape Quilp. Once on the road, they encounter living curiosities more intriguing than those in the shop, and sometimes more menacing. This, the picaresque and largely comic segment of the novel, serves as a necessary, albeit brief, counterpoint to the nightmarish scenes in London, providing images of a resourceful, hopeful, even cheerful Nell. Dickens' imagination has full play here, as he conjures up characters and incidents that make life on the road seductively appealing. Eventually, Nell and Trent come upon the "comfortable" Mrs. Jarley, the proud possessor of Jarley's Wax-Work Show. This accommodating "lady of the caravan" employs them in the wax-work exhibition—Trent dusting the figures at night, Nell advertising the show by day. For a time they thrive, until one evening during a relaxed walk in the country, they enter an inn to take shelter from a storm.

To Nell's dismay, a game of cards is in progress, and the grandfather feverishly joins in. After he has lost the contents of Nell's "little purse" (" 'A very pretty little purse. Rather a light purse . . . but enough to amuse a gentleman for half an hour or

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so,' " leers one of his companions), Nell reasons that she can use her reserve—a gold piece she had sewn into her dress before leaving London—to pay for supper and two rooms, for the storm is still raging. " 'If I had only known of it a few minutes ago!'," complains the old man when Nell says she has a little more money. Nell ignores him and privately conducts her transaction with the innkeeper, taking the gold coin from its hiding-place and changing it to pay for their lodging. She has the sense that she is being watched, but decides it is her imagination.

Alone in her room, Nell fears that one of the rough men downstairs might come to rob or murder her. She sleeps fitfully only to dream of "falling from high towers," then wakes suddenly to find a "figure in the room":

> A figure was there. Yes, . . . there, between the foot of the bed and the dark casement, it crouched and slunk along, groping its way with noiseless hands, and stealing round the bed. She had no voice to cry for help, no power to move, but lay still, watching it.

Moving "silently and stealthily," the figure, with "wandering hands," takes Nell's clothes from the bed and searches through them. Once it has the money, it replaces the clothes and "drop[s] upon its hands and knees and crawl[s] away."

In silent shock and terror, Nell's first impulse after the figure leaves her room is "not to be alone," to "have somebody by," so that her "power of speech would be restored." She rises and goes to the door, following the figure down the stairs, hoping to reach safety in her grandfather's room. When the figure stops at her grandfather's door, she fears for the old man. When it goes in, she is dumbfounded. Resolved to "preserve" her grandfather or "be killed" herself, she "stagger[s]" to the door and discovers "the old man himself . . . counting the money of which his hands had robbed her."

Nell's response, once she is back in her room, is one of complete devastation. "No strange robber," she thinks, "could have awakened in her bosom half the dread which the recognition of her silent visitor inspired." The reality of the "grey-headed old man . . . acting the thief while he supposed her fast asleep, then bearing off his prize and hanging over it with . . . ghastly exultation" is "worse—immeasurably worse, and far more dreadful, for the moment, to reflect upon—than anything her wildest

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fancy could have suggested." She fears her grandfather's return and imagines a footstep on the stairs, the opening of her door:

> It was but imagination, yet imagination had all the terrors of reality; nay, it was worse, for the reality would have come and gone, and there an end, but in imagination it was always coming, and never went away.

When I first re-read this passage a few years ago, I was as paralyzed and dumbstruck to discover it as Nell is to discover her grandfather counting her money. I understood, in an instant, why the novel would have meant so much to me at the age of ten—and also why I would so thoroughly have repressed it. For although I was never physically harmed by my grandmother, I was subjected nightly to a palpable "robbery" of my spirit—what Leonard Shengold[1] chillingly calls "soul-murder." It was an experience magnified by my imagination and made greater because it could never be named. Yet here, in this novel discovered by chance at the local library, I found a scene setting forth an image of my own life—a girl violated by a grandparent. No wonder I experienced the book as a refuge, reading it with hunger and abandon.

Dickens' description of the robbery is vivid and precise, an example of his writing at its best. Yet very few critics have analyzed or called attention to this pivotal moment in the novel, the scene that epitomizes its plot and theme. In an extensive survey of the criticism, I have found only one article, by Gareth Cordery,[2] that uses it as a central part of its argument. Cordery, in a provocative Freudian reading, calls the theft a "symbolic rape," a "symbolic violation," diagnosing Trent as a "compulsive or pathological gambler whose repressed sexual desires for Nell . . . manifest themselves in gambling."

While Cordery's interpretation is more classically Freudian than the text seems to warrant, Dickens certainly suggests that Trent's feeling for Nell re-enacts his feeling for his wife. Described in terms that evoke a specifically sexual attack, the robbery may be as close as Dickens, writing for a Victorian family

[1] Leonard Shengold, *Soul Murder: The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation* (New Haven, 1989).

[2] Gareth Cordery, "The Gambling Grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop*," *Literature and Psychology*, 33.1 (1987), pp. 43–61.

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audience, could come in depicting an actual rape. Given his emphasis on Nell's vulnerable sexuality early in the novel, it is hard to believe he did not want adult readers to understand the scene as having overtones of violation and exploitation.

Just as arresting as the sexuality of the scene is its violence. If, as many feminists have argued, the essence of rape is not sex but power, then Dickens has, in another sense, written a terrifying rape scene. More than desire for his granddaughter, the robbery enacts Trent's rage against the women (his wife and daughter) who abandoned him in death—and perhaps even before death. I think again of my grandmother, at what must have been her rage after her daughter's death, and then at her husband's sudden death from typhoid fever. And I know that my mother and I became the focus for that rage. While agreeing with Cordery, then, I would go further: this "symbolic rape" is an actual assault; the violation of a child need not be sexual, or even physical, to be devastating.

While Dickens' portrayal of Trent's violation of Nell seems unmistakable, critics have usually focused on Quilp, that "gargoyle perversion of cruelty" whom Edgar Johnson[3] calls "the supreme grotesque creation of the book," and whom Paul Schlicke[4] describes as the "embodiment" of the "frightening and hostile world" in which Nell finds herself. To Schlicke Quilp is an "archetypal image," the "fantastic projection of all of Nell's fears," giving "anxiety a mythic dimension." Yet because Dickens creates such a powerful symbol in Quilp, readers are likely to forget that the immediate threat to Nell comes not from him but from her grandfather.

I too have succumbed to the fascination with the "archetypal image." Not long after my recent re-reading of the novel, and when I had already begun to plan this essay, I dreamt that I killed Quilp:

> I am spending the day in a large library, in a city that is a cross between New York and New Orleans. I have been working late, absorbed in my reading. I leave to go home, and turn down a street, intending to catch a bus. Suddenly I have entered a nightmare city:

[3] Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* (New York, 1952), Volume 1.
[4] Paul Schlicke, "The True Pathos of *The Old Curiosity Shop*," *Dickens Quarterly*, 7.1 (March 1990), pp. 189–199.

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> the street is dark and deserted and although I know that I am just around the corner from familiarity and safety, the way back appears long and dangerous. Now I sense a man coming towards me from behind; I feel that he wants to harm me, and I think he is about to begin chasing me. Because I know that he is faster than I am, I realize that my only hope is to face and confront him. So I turn, seeing in him a vision of concentrated ugliness, of deliberate evil, of the desire to annihilate me. He is across the street, coming steadily towards me. There is no one else around, and my only choice is either to fight or be killed. Instead of letting him get to me, I kill him. I use what is at hand, a folding shopping cart I find on the street, which I hook over his head, twist, and use to break his neck. I am extraordinarily pleased with myself, delighted to have survived intact.

I woke thinking "I just killed Quilp," and feeling an enormous sense of triumph.

But now I wonder about my triumph in killing Quilp. For Quilp is a dramatic displacement, a distraction from the central source of danger to Nell. Like the mask in my toy chest, the lion in my dream, he is a safe focus for Nell's and the reader's anxieties. In creating such a richly symbolic figure, Dickens colludes with his readers' desires to deny the dark message embedded in his novel: that the greatest damage children sustain comes not from external predators but from the adults with whom they live. Today I long for a dream in which I turn to face, not Quilp or a lion or a witch's mask, but my grandmother herself.

For Nell, the inability to confront her violator proves deadly. Her first response to the discovery that her grandfather has robbed her is the classic response of the rape victim, and particularly of the child victim of incest. She is silent, terrified, immobilized—and ashamed. In a scene set on the morning after the theft, Dickens uncannily externalizes Nell's sense of humiliation. She has been sent by Mrs. Jarley to advertise the wax-works at "Miss Monflathers' Boarding and Day Establishment." Nell arrives at the door just as Miss Monflathers and her "young ladies" are leaving, and Miss Monflathers seizes the occasion to chastise Nell, the "wax-work child" for being "a very wicked little child, " "naughty and unfeminine," because she is not engaged in productive work. Bursting into tears, Nell feels herself the center of attention and cannot speak. When one of the girls picks up and gives back to Nell the handkerchief she has dropped in her

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distress, Miss Monflathers reprimands *her* for being "vulgar-minded" and indecorous.

In the days that follow, Nell keeps her terrible secret, unable to confront her grandfather or to tell anyone else. She withdraws completely into herself, coming to live in a devastating isolation:

> the colour forsook her cheek, her eye grew dim, and her heart was oppressed and heavy. All her old sorrows had come back upon her, augmented by new fears and doubts; by day they were ever present to her mind; by night they hovered round her pillow, and haunted her in dreams.

She takes to following the girl who had picked up her handkerchief. This girl shares a warm relationship with a sister. As Nell watches the two from a distance, she imagines having a friend to whom she might tell her troubles. Yet she is too timid to approach the girl.

When, a few weeks later, Nell overhears her grandfather plotting to rob Mrs. Jarley, she insists that they must leave—claiming to have had dreams of an old man who robs his friends while they sleep. Back on the road, they spend a miserable day in the rain, then arrive at a dark, polluted, and depressed industrial city. Nell suffers from "cold, wet, hunger, want of rest," becoming "ill in body, and sick to death at heart." Although the desperate pair are rescued by a kindly schoolmaster whom they had befriended earlier, it is too late for Nell. Brought to a peaceful village where she is at last safe and surrounded by genuine love and care, she gives herself over to death—tending flowers in a graveyard and dreaming of being welcomed into heaven. Her saintly dying occupies the final 200 pages of this nearly 700-page novel.

And it is this death, drawn out and apparently savored by Dickens, that has prompted the most extreme reactions to *The Old Curiosity Shop*—from the tears of the Victorian men who broke down and cried when they came to the novel's concluding pages, to the guffaws of succeeding generations who affirmed with Oscar Wilde that "one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing." For 150 years, critical opinion about the novel has swerved between these two extremes. The high charge associated with the novel, either for praise or blame, suggests that it touches a territory of taboo. *The Old Curiosity Shop*

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causes us to laugh or to cry but rarely to look steadily at the phenomenon at its center: the neglect and abuse of children.

In a recent article, Robert Polhemus[5] argues that Nell functions as a "Protestant, Victorian version of the Virgin Mary," a sacrificial Madonna/Christ who could "focus and purge cultural, collective, and personal guilt—particularly conscious and unconscious male guilt towards girls and women." Polhemus' is one of the few essays I know that gets at what appears to have been a major function of *The Old Curiosity Shop* for its nineteenth-century audience, accounting for both the tears and the laughter, and not flinching from an examination of the pain at the novel's core. Yet Polhemus' focus is on adult male readers who need Nell's sacrificial death in order to "revive the spiritual potency of the old dying patriarchal faith." But what if one wants, not to shore up old ruins but to create a vital new religion? What if the reader is, not an adult male, but a female child?

The final illustration of *The Old Curiosity Shop* shows Nell being lifted up to heaven by angels; it is an image that echoes Renaissance portrayals of the Assumption of Mary. This Nell is an embodied female divinity who dies to save a fallen world, a goddess who provides her age and ours with a figure of redemptive feminine power in a culture that has, until recently, forgotten the goddesses that warmed the ancient world. Yet Nell is a divinity without sexuality—a child-goddess who never achieves adulthood, who is never in full possession of herself. Polhemus argues that Nell dies a virgin, and that this is essential to her apotheosis. I am not so sure, for if the robbery represents a rape, then Nell—in Victorian terms—is a fallen woman (and thus also destined to die). But in either case, untouched virgin or rape victim, Nell dies a child. Despite her grandfather's lament that she "would be a woman soon," Nell turns away from her own womanhood, and Dickens' unorthodox goddess suffers from—and inculcates—the same deprivations as does Christianity's orthodox female icon, the Virgin Mary.

Dickens retreats from the radical potential of his devastating analysis of abuse and exploitation into a sentimentalized version of sacrifice and redemption. This is why Oscar Wilde was right in

[5] Robert M. Polhemus, "Comic and Erotic Faith Meet in the Child: Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* ('The Old Cupiosity Shape')," *Critical Reconstructions: The Relationship of Fiction and Life*, ed. by Robert M. Polhemus and Roger B. Henkle (Stanford, 1994), pp. 71–89.

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laughing at the novel's conclusion. Dickens' vision of the dying child ultimately betrays her and the truth his novel has so carefully unfolded. That the novelist could imagine other endings to his story is evident in his portrayal of the Marchioness in this novel—a horribly abused girl who manages, through wit and perseverance and luck, to triumph quite nicely over adverse circumstances. Nell remains, however, the center of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the suffering and silent victim whose death became a Victorian media event.

Reading and re-reading *The Old Curiosity Shop* today and recognizing the extent to which I identified with Nell as a child, I know that it is time to let her go—even though I cannot now imagine what my childhood would have been like if I had not found her. She was my witness, my alter ego, the self who existed in language and gave me a home there as well. Nell dies, it is true, but not before she has been given the kind of attention abused or neglected children rarely receive; with a fervor born of his own early pain, Dickens lavishes on Nell the care all children deserve. That I felt safe in Dickens' world but not my own is hardly surprising: for, in its acknowledgment of Nell's vulnerability, the narrative itself gives Nell the love she needs. While reading *The Old Curiosity Shop*, I could relax into the shelter of its printed words, words that took seriously my own circumstances, that gave shape to my own fantasies and fears. If the domain of written language became, then, my primary place of survival, it is no wonder. It is where I live most truly still today, and where, after all these years, I have sought to resurrect this lonely child of dream and vision.

Yet as I bring Nell into consciousness, I can see her as the construction of a culture that has glorified its innocent victims to purge its guilt even while it continues to commit its crimes. I also see her as a construction of my own dreaming self, seeking vindication rather than transformation. For Nell is the sacrificed child in all of us, the uncorrupted embodiment of innocence destroyed, the fantasized redemption we all seek in our lost Edens. Giving up identification with her involves giving up a schematized vision of good and evil, victims and perpetrators: I come to see my grandmother not as a witch but as a broken woman, my parents as themselves bewildered children trying to balance their loyalties and responsibilities. I can, in this moment,

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forgive them—not with the forgiveness of perfect self-sacrifice that Nell embodies, but with the forgiveness of a troubled and incomplete compassion. For I too am both good and evil, victim and perpetrator, caught in the same tangled web of circumstance. Saying good-bye to Nell, the child who sustained me for so long, I can at last begin to live—in the world of reality as well as dreams.

That statue of *Dickens and Little Nell* in Clark Park makes sense to me now in a way I could never have anticipated during those years when I was busy earning my Ph.D. Completed by Frank Edwin Elwell in 1890, it was commissioned by Washington newspaper publisher Stilson Hutchins. When Hutchins failed to pay for it, Elwell took his sculpture to England hoping to find it a home—and learned that in his will, Dickens had requested that no "monument, memorial or testimonial whatever" be constructed. The British honored Dickens' request. Back in the States, Elwell exhibited *Dickens and Little Nell* at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, where it won two gold medals and attracted the interest of the Fairmount Park Art Association, which purchased it in 1901.

Over the years, *Dickens and Little Nell* has become a favorite haunt of neighborhood children. Annually on Dickens' birthday, the Philadelphia chapter of the Dickens Fellowship lays a wreath of holly at Nell's feet; periodically, neighborhood associations rouse themselves against efforts to move the statue to a more prominent location in Center City Philadelphia. In November 1989, vandals damaged the statue, ripping Nell from the base and leaving her face down on the ground. "Terrible news: Little Nell has been ravaged," wrote Martha Rosso of the Dickens Fellowship to London headquarters. A series of articles in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* decried the desecration; Charles Dickens' great-grandson in London was notified; and the Friends of Clark Park launched a campaign to raise funds to restore the statue. By October 1990, one hundred years after its completion, $6,500 had been raised and the statue was restored and rededicated. Today Nell is again a powerful presence in Clark Park. On my next trip to Philadelphia, I intend not merely to pause before this remarkable tribute to a fictional character and her creator, but to bring this wreath of my own.

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JOHN HALES

Falling

Three children fell to their deaths in the mountains just above my home, a few days after Christmas, the year I turned ten. The children—two girls and one boy—were two years behind me in school, and they lived in my neighborhood. One of them had been given a camera as a Christmas present, and they'd found their way up Waterfall Canyon to take pictures of the mass of ice the waterfall becomes each winter. This is not an easy hike even in the summer—the canyon is steep, rising dramatically from the foothills until the canyon dead-ends in the rock face over which the waterfall cascades hundreds of feet—but children of the neighborhood climbed it routinely every month of the year.

When the three hadn't returned by sundown, parents, friends and neighbors headed up the trail, following the narrow pathway the children had left in a foot of new snow, making their way by flashlights in the quiet winter night. They found the bodies of all three children in the half-frozen water of the creek, at the base of the waterfall, several hundred feet below the cliff from which they'd fallen. One girl was still alive, but died in her father's arms as he scrambled down the slippery trail to the ambulances and police cars that waited at the end of the nearest plowed street.

It felt to me as though the children had been taken from my family; life in my neighborhood was tight, close, and intimate, and the neighborhood mourned as a family would. More than neighbors, we were connected by bonds of religion and geography that are difficult to describe. Our lives revolved around the Mormon meeting house, which we attended for Sunday worship and midweek religious instruction, as well as dances, basketball games, and Boy Scout meetings. The church building drew us with a force as constant and unnoticed as gravity, and the landscape reinforced the sense of insularity and connection. The neighborhood's boundaries were determined by the oakbrush-covered swells of foothills and, directly east, the sharply rising

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rock face of the Wasatch Front, the cliffs that transformed quiet mountain streams into reckless waterfalls, accelerating the snowmelt on its way to joining the lifeless waters of the Great Salt Lake. Only those neighborhood streets that ran due west, towards the spread of the city below, connected with other neighborhoods. Every other street in my neighborhood sooner or later terminated in a cul-de-sac or a dead end imposed by steep hills and rock outcroppings.

The children's funerals were held one after the other in the neighborhood meeting house, a building that nestled comfortably among the hills, its brick the color of the mountains behind it, the same color brick as the house I grew up in. My mother taught the Sunday school class one girl had attended, and she directed the remaining girls as they sang "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam."

We were haunted during the coming winter months by the three dead children. My friends and I pored over the tragedy, analyzing what we knew and testing the plausibility of what we imagined, sifting rumors, conjecture, and excuses, turning over in our hands the meager set of details that promised to explain what had actually happened. It was my first experience facing the insufficiency of mere facts, pondering the gap that separates what *happens* from what those events *mean*. Trying to make sense of their deaths led us to attempt assigning responsibility, to establish the starting point of a trail of reasoning that would lead us to some kind of comfort or release, and eventually permission to begin thinking about something else.

We grasped easily the circumstances, the temptations, that had led to the tragedy. It was foolish of them to have climbed up the icy cliff, we agreed, but we conceded that we'd all done it, sometimes in winter, and we knew that there were some good reasons for taking the risk: we'd been rewarded by a view of the falls more dramatic, and somehow more personally powerful, than the picture one gets from the bottom. When you stand on top, the roar of falling water focuses your senses. You see water become vapor that freezes instantly beneath your feet; you see the slow formation of ice as it coalesces, connects, accumulates layer by brittle layer. You see this happening against the backdrop of the safe homes and yards of your neighborhood, your own warm house, immediately below. The afternoon sun lights up the water

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as it escapes the narrow channel at the top, and if you look over the edge, you can see the water escape into the thinness of air, become ice, cling to itself in sheets, falling away in frozen shrouds that meet the ice-covered rocks below. To this day I sympathize deeply with the children's desire to capture the experience on film, to honor the moment with a new camera.

As we struggled to understand what had happened, we were surprised to discover that we could find nothing to blame, could hold nothing responsible, least of all the mountains, a fact that provokes a little anger and much amazement in my wife, who grew up in a nearby town but miles away from the immediate beauty and danger of the mountains that seemingly rose from my back yard. They're *dangerous*, she tells me, incredulous that I grew up engaging in activity she equates with playing in traffic. When I first told her about the three children, she said: look at the facts. They were standing on top of a cliff, looking over the edge of a frozen waterfall. They were children, she said, climbing around alone in the mountains in the middle of winter. Years later we would leave the Grand Canyon a day earlier than we'd planned partly because we couldn't agree on how close to the edge of a safety-railed overlook our own children should be allowed to stand; she had grown up in a neighborhood where the Wasatch Mountains provided a distant backdrop to more immediate terrors of crime, industrial pollution, and the violence of poverty, facts of her life she had similarly accommodated.

To tell the truth, even in the face of the three deaths, I still have a hard time blaming the mountains, the children, their parents, or anything else. Even by the age of eight—in Mormonism, the age of baptism and of spiritual accountability—we were old enough to know that it was dangerous to stand on slippery surfaces, and there were a few important rules we followed. We didn't go into the mountains alone, and we let our parents know where we were going and when we'd be back—the three children had hiked farther into the mountains than they'd been given permission to go, probably farther than they'd planned. Those of us who carried .22s into the mountains knew better than to walk with a round in the chamber, and we generally held each other's rifles when we crossed fences, just as we'd been told. We were encouraged often to use common sense, to avoid taking unnec-

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essary risks, to keep in mind the dangers of standing too close to the edge.

As we talked over what we knew about the accident, we all found different stumbling blocks, details we couldn't get past. What puzzled *me* most was the mystery of numbers: why did all *three* children fall? The only thing, I reasoned, that could account for their falling together was that they'd been holding hands, steadying each other on the slippery rocks, depending too much on their common courage, their belief in the safety of numbers properly connected. In my imagination, I saw one child slip, the others in panic and trust and reflex hanging on, digging in their heels, well-meaning and confused and wrong, peeling off and falling together. Over and over again, I witnessed in my mind three children, still connected by the only thing they had left, dropping through the late afternoon, letting go only as they hit the lower reaches of the cliff face and were knocked apart by the force of their falling, separated finally when it was too late to do any one of them any good.

I grew up believing the mountains were safe. From the time I was in first or second grade, I'd walk home from school, tell my parents that I was going on a hike, and they'd tell me to be back before dark, and to be careful. They'd want to know where I was going and whom I was going with, but for short hikes they trusted my judgment. They weren't careless—by then I'd shown them that I knew where I was in the mountains, that I could find my way home.

We trusted in the comforting straightforwardness of the geography. The Wasatch Front—to be more specific, the orange metamorphic rock that rises from the foothills due east of my neighborhood to form the peaks we knew, it seemed, from birth: Malan's Peak, Mount Ogden, Lewis Peak (named after my great-great-grandfather Lewis Warren Shurtliff, a Mormon pioneer who had climbed it as a boy), the more exotically named Ben Lomond—ran dependably north and south, and all its drainages ran straight west down the mountain and through the back yards and city parks and under the bridged roads of the foothill neighborhoods of Ogden. I remember my father's telling me on what must have been my first hike up Waterfall Canyon that if I ever got lost, I need only follow a stream downhill. It will

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lead you to people, to safety, he told me, and even today, after being lost dozens of times in places where streams lead you exactly where you don't want to go, it's difficult for me to question the easy comfortable logic of his advice.

The few other things I remember about that first Waterfall Canyon hike also contributed to the feeling that no harm could come to me in the mountains. The canyon was not too distant from the convent adjoining St. Benedict's Hospital, a Catholic enclave planted in the middle of the thickest concentration of Mormons in the world, and I remember meeting several nuns in flowing ankle-length black-and-white habits walking with dignity up the difficult trail. My father, an ear-nose-and-throat surgeon, worked daily with the nuns, and we paused and made conversation. I have a vivid picture in my mind: a dusty trail high above Ogden, Utah; my father, straw cowboy hat in hand, talking jovially with a group of nuns, their stark habits subduing the Mormon air and taming the wilderness around them, providing the same illusion of comfort and control they brought to the bedsides of the dying.

I also remember deriving comfort from arrows painted on boulders and rock faces along the trail. Someone had recently taken responsibility for addressing the problem of direction: everybody in Ogden knew which of the several possible canyons was *Waterfall* Canyon, but it was difficult to find your way through the maze of trails and foothill roads to the correct trail. It was possible to wander for hours following one false dead-ending path after another without finding your way to the Waterfall trail, which actually began without fanfare some distance above the two brown-and-silver municipal water tanks we'd always throw rocks at from above, celebrating our relief that we'd found the right way. Some do-gooder—or, more likely, a scout troop—had painted garish yellow arrows on rocks and trees along the trail, with "waterfall" painted on boulders with sufficient surface area, making the landscape a gigantic map of itself. As I grew older, I came to resent the painted arrows that had proved by then annoyingly durable, but I had been comforted by their presence on that first hike, when I couldn't have been older than four or five. Arrows pointed the way up, and the stream—once it had fallen over the rock, dispersed into vapor and spray, and gathered itself again—guided the way home.

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My wife, of course, is right: the mountains were *not* safe. The waterfall trail was treacherous, I realize now: this was no by-the-books Forest Service trail, with minimums for width and rise and trustworthy bridges where the trail crosses the stream, but a haphazardly worn path that led the hiker over a couple of miles of exposed tree roots, crumbling stream banks, loose talus slopes, and at least a dozen times across the icy water and mossy stones of Waterfall Creek itself. Most of the trails above Ogden were similarly primitive, but everybody in my neighborhood hiked—nuns, housewives, grandparents, teenagers in love, boys with .22s, and children with cameras they'd gotten for Christmas.

Even the rock was much less dependable than it appeared. If you looked carefully, you could see in the creamy orange cliffs the sleepy layers of shallow-lake sediment that had been flatironed into metamorphic quartzite, and you could also see evidence of the way it had been tortured into rising thousands of feet above its dependably horizontal beginnings, leaving dramatic twists and folds that geologists (we were told) came from all over the world to examine. Malan's Peak, the spur of Mount Ogden that rose directly above our houses, looked from a distance as if it would stand unchanging through the millennium we heard about each week in church, but those of us who dared to trust our weight to *specific* outcroppings learned that it was falling apart with age and decay. I can remember clearly the first time a chunk of Malan's Peak came off in my hands, releasing a cascade of dirt and small rocks over my friends waiting patiently, but too close, below, the betrayal almost throwing me off my perch. I came gradually to understand that the layers of orange mud sealed eons ago by subterranean heat were delaminating before my eyes, but such understanding couldn't dislodge my faith in the mountains' dependable presence, a trust that was very nearly religious.

In fact, religion had a lot to do with my belief that no harm would come to me in the mountains. My feelings were encouraged by the peculiarly mythic relationship that Mormons have cultivated with the Utah landscape: the belief in the permanence of rock, the willingness of loving parents to entrust their children to the care of mountain peaks, canyons and streams, were deeply imbedded in Mormon culture. I understood that my ancestors—along with the great-great-grandparents of many who lived in my neighborhood—had fled to the safety of these particular moun-

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tains, driven from less secure landscapes, chased by mobs across the steamy flat geography of the Mississippi drainage, their wagons climbing slowly across the rising aridity of Nebraska and Wyoming to lodge themselves in the impenetrable mountain valleys of the Wasatch, sheltered finally from the weathers that had buffeted them.

The mountains provided the raw materials for building the Mormon empire: the snowpack assured a dependable water supply for irrigating what would otherwise remain desert, and the steep hillsides provided lumber for building houses and granite for the construction of temples and department stores. But the Mormon trust in mountains was much more elaborate than simple utility. The stories we told, the songs we sang, the reverence with which we talked about the mountains amounted to a relationship that was practically pagan. We were *home* in the mountains; more importantly, we were *back* home, returned to some kind of primal mother's lap. True, much of the language the church employed was military—as my friends and I demonstrated year after year, sometimes even firing live ammunition, the mountains were great places for forts and hideouts, and during Mormondom's brief war against the invading armies of the United States in 1857, the mountain passes through which the enemy were required to gain entry proved to be well designed by Providence for bushwhacking and ambush: in the words of one hymn we sang on patriotic holidays, "Zion stands with hills surrounded." A word to the wise.

But my favorite hymn, "Oh Ye Mountains High," which we sang at least once a month in the neighborhood chapel, described not a hiding place, or a landscape lending itself to strategic defense, but a "mountain home," an Eden "where the pure breezes blow and the clear streamlets flow." My wife's great-grandmother wrote these words for another song intended for Mormon children to sing:

> Firm as the mountains around us,
> Stalwart and brave we stand
> On the rock our fathers planted
> For us in this goodly land.

My childhood Sundays were spent singing about the mountains all morning in church, running to the foothills at the end of the

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street I lived on to spend a few hours after Sunday dinner, and returning to the late afternoon gathering we called sacrament meeting in order to receive religious instruction, take communion, and sing about the mountains some more. Outside of church, nothing else in the world seemed as dependable as the mountains: crumbling rock, rattlesnakes, even the deaths of three children couldn't convince me that I could be hurt in the mountains that rose above my home. In spite of much evidence to the contrary, we talked about the mountains as though we could depend on them.

We thought the mountains were safe in part because they did not partake of what we knew *wasn't* safe. There were other things more obviously dangerous than the rocks and canyons of the Wasatch Front: automobiles that crossed randomly and unaccountably from their lane into ours, the polio that had permanently compromised my brother's life, the rusty nail that pierced my gym shoe as I walked across a building site, the patched-together bicycles we raced across hard unforgiving cement. My first childhood injury serious enough to require x-rays was the result not of a fall from a mountain ledge, but a bicycle accident, a collision with Sylvia Keller, a girl my age who was remarkable for two things: she brought a human skull to school each year for show and tell, explaining that it came from an Indian grave her father had exhumed in digging the foundation for their house; and she was the first girl in the neighborhood to wear a bra. We'd been racing our bikes down the steepest street in our neighborhood, the only street that followed the actual steep contour of the foothills, when we collided, losing our balance and grabbing each other, our hands confusedly clinging and pushing until our bikes met and tangled, launching us together into a long arcing fall that left her with bloody scrapes and me with a lump on the side of my head and a concussion that erased four hours of my life. Of that day, I remember walking home from school in the bright afternoon sunshine of late spring, and I remember waking up in my parents' bed, the room darkened by early evening, and everything I know about the intervening hours—my minute or so of unconsciousness, the nonsense syllables I spoke as I tried to untangle my bike from Sylvia's, the deep sleep I fell into after my father, summoned from the hospital, had checked my vital signs,

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the reaction of my pupils to light, my correctly knowing who I was and even who was president of the United States—is second hand. For months afterward, I searched for those missing hours the way a tongue explores the void left by a lost filling.

I don't remember our parents telling us following the deaths in Waterfall Canyon that the mountains were off-limits, but that winter, for the first time in my memory, we avoided even the foothills. It wasn't until spring sunshine thawed the frozen waterfall and brought green to hillside vegetation flattened by the weight of a record snowpack that we ventured back. I don't remember our talking it over, making a conscious and logical decision based on whatever lesson could be derived from the tragedy, and to this day I'm not sure whether it was fear or reverence that had kept us out, but the melting of the snow seemed a kind of permission to return, and, not incidentally, to stop talking about the mountains the way we'd been talking about them. With spring we returned to our habits of spending the brief after-school daylight hours in the foothills, and when the school year ended, my friends and I spent long summer days on the same trails we'd always hiked, and our parents continued to act on their belief that somehow no harm could befall us in the mountains, that the Wasatch Front offered one of the few safe places in this dangerous world, and when winter returned, we found our way once again into the icy canyons.

For many years, there's been a rock the size of a softball in the trophy case of the Mormon chapel just down the street from the house I grew up in, the building in which the children's funerals were held. "Waterfall" is painted in a neat red arc on the rock's only flat side. My Sunday school class retrieved this rock from Waterfall Canyon, at the conclusion of a winter hike made to observe once again the ice coating the orange cliffs, to witness the water freezing as it fell through the cold afternoon air. We sat eating our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on the spot where the dead and dying children had been found only a year before, resting ourselves after a cold and slippery hike under the supervision of our Sunday school teacher, a tall, meek man who had recently returned from a mission to Mexico. In bargaining for our cooperation during a particularly chaotic Sunday school class, he'd foolishly promised us we could choose our own activity for

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the next of the "recreation days" we were granted a couple of times a year. We demanded a hike up Waterfall Canyon, and the very next Saturday we dragged him up the trail to the icy waterfall, sat there a moment eating our lunches and admiring the view, and picked out a suitable rock. We just did it. I'm pretty sure none of us thought of the children who'd fallen there; I'm certain no one mentioned them.

This kind of amnesia—inattention, denial, whatever it is—has happened to me over and over again: I hike to the base of the waterfall, take in the view of the falls and, over my shoulder, the maplike perspective of the town I grew up in, my old neighborhood framed by the shoulders of the canyon. I rejoice in the feel of the sharp pelting water that falls like hurled rain on my face and outstretched arms, ice-cold even in midsummer, and I do not remember the deaths of the children until I leave the shadow of the canyon on the hike back. Often, over the years, I've been carrying one of my own children, by this time worn-out and bored.

So I didn't think of the children on that day in January, almost exactly a year after they'd been killed. I'm sure none of us spoke their names, and no one pointed to the spot where we all knew their broken bodies had been found. Instead, we brought back the rock, a piece of Waterfall Canyon. We took turns carrying it down the slippery trail, and Sylvia Keller—the girl I would collide with a few months later—took it home and carefully painted in dark red nail polish the name of the canyon we'd returned to in coldest January, on an outing part children's crusade and part Sunday-school picnic; and there it sits, no one quite remembering why it's there, gathering dust amid scouting awards, basketball trophies and certificates of achievement in the glass case just outside the chapel door.

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LAURENCE LIEBERMAN

The Diamond Miner and the Mermaid

Mazaruni River, Guyana

Crossovers.
Hindus and Amerindians both worship that woman
of the sea: the Mermaid, patron saint
and wrathful angel, by turns.
To the native rain forest tribes, she's
Water Mama. She has pervasive—if limited—
powers. Gales and hurricanes, all storms spawned
at sea, are her bailiwick.
Her Theater in the Round. No fewer
than nine known sects
pay her tribute, offerings wafted into the winds
or sprayed upon the rivers—on holidays.
To the Hindus, as well, she's
Mother Ganga. All powerful. River
omnipotent. She,

and she only, rules these feisty waters.
On sacred days,
aged crones, young lovers, chambermaids,
small children of Hindu caste—
all hasten to the seawall near Georgetown at daybreak,
or *before* first light, to bestrew fresh-picked

wildflowers
and fruits upon the river's currents. They moan
chants, or recite brief ancient verses,
as they scatter their ritual
gifts to Mother Ganga. She, of the acrid-
smelling broad-finned scaly fishtail, presides
over the lives of Guyana folk, and often invades
their dreams . . . The morning
after his long night's dig & dredge
of the river bottom
diamond mines, young Chico dropped in the mirror-
calm Mazaruni a hook baited with black-haired

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many-legged tarantulas (scooped
from his tent floor with a tin cup),
and then commenced

his three-hour siesta. He'd forgotten
the cork-bobbered
line, when he awoke to a gurgly churning
of currents beside his river's-
edge tent stakeout. He absently raised knotted twine
from the shore bank, and drew against a fierce

tugging . . . yanked up
by the rosy-jagged gills a record-size Lou-Lou.
This thirty-pound giant catfish spun
about in wild flapping gyrations,
touching its tail to rubbery long snout,
repeatedly, during those convulsive heaves
to escape. The agile youth slowly lifted his catch
from the bankside gulf,
amazed at the Lou-Lou's thick girth—
he stood poised to twist
the hook from its bony jaws with his pocket wrench
when the portly fish shot upward like a rocket
discharged from its booster. He swung
awry, finding that tent mate Curzon,
stout Venezuelan

immigrant, had snared his prize catfish
with savage meat-hook
through its belly, knowing pal Chico meant
to throw the colossal fish back
into the briny river-scum surface unwounded, as he'd
always done before. Vegetarian and kindhearted

soul that he was,
the Hindu miner would never trap—much less kill—
wild beings that flourished in wind,
earth or waters: bird, rabbit, fish . . .
Yet his peer, Curzon, had swept the Lou-Lou
away before Chico could gasp, or blare out
his protest. No matter, it's a mere fish, he consoled
himself; but that evening,
the scariest dream of his life
befell him. Mother Ganga,
bare-breasted and crowned with a diamond tiara, came
to him: afloat in the tent space over his head,

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she held up two mammoth Lou-Lous
on short fish stringers, and bespoke
sad omens. He, Chico,

the one loyal guardian of God's creatures
in the miner's camp,
would be held *to blame, to blame. Take heed*! . . .
He'd worked in the diamond mine
which had disgorged some of the bulkiest uncut gemstones
in the world over the past five years—the mermaid's

jewels seemed drawn
from that stock. The largest gems in her necklace
were still jagged-edged, raw diamonds
in the rough; they had the translucent
glaze of beauty unrefined, and some flashed
with a haunting neonesque half-light. But stones
in her coronet were cut and honed to a perfect scale
of finish. And so taken
was he with the pulsing of those
many-faceted brilliants
encircling her brow and hung from her neck, he hardly
noted, at first, that her long ruffled white dress
fell across a great broad fishtail
that burgeoned from her hips. It curled
upwards at the bottom,

and waggled back and forth as she spoke.
She hovered in air
above his hammock, the two immense fish dangled
over his brow. She scolded him
for laying a fish trap, hairy-legged spider bait tossed
casually into the river for *cruel sport.* Chico,

of all people!
He alone—among the miners—emoted a spirit
of caretaking toward most animals
which abounded near the camp base.
His fellow diamond miners, one and all,
rapaciously scavenged the forest creatures
and fish; thus, she gave Chico notice that the time
for the group's comeuppance
was at hand. So he should take heed—
be forewarned of just deserts
she would soon dole out. Then she wept beady tears,
in grief for the dead & wounded beasts—they fell

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to her breast, drop by drop, like lumps
of molten ore and sizzled, steamily,
on her pale skin

as she crooned her warnings . . . He awoke,
shuddering. Her figure
had vanished, but the two fish hung suspended
where she left them, slick scales
gleaming for some minutes before his wide-awake trance.
He blinked, fiercely, until they too faded from view,

sighing with relief
as one who had stared down a sick hallucination.
But he spent hours fearfully alert,
wary lest those accusing fish shapes
reappear, whether in sleep or waking dream.
Then forgot . . . Two weeks slipped past. And without
a moment's warning, brutal wind-storm struck the river.
Choppiest waves, ever,
swept the surface and currents
ran amok, fierce whirlpools
winding around the miners' two bargelike dredge boats.
The eddies kept reversing spin direction, heaving
the boats this way and that, each vessel
tilting more and more, skippers battling
at the steerage—

but keels upended and sank, three divers
drowning in last ditch
plummets to save the ships . . . Days before,
Chico had warned the mine bosses
about his dream omens, but they scoffed at his *sissyish ravings*—and fell victim to the Dark Angel's curse.

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LAURA APOL

Umbilical

for William Stafford

Eight dollars was too much for
a book of poems—yours or any other—
in graduate school, a baby on the way.
Lifelines are seldom free.

In the end I used the week's
bus fare, remembering
my grandfather stringing ropes
in Midwest blizzards—

intricate webs, house
to barn to shed and
back—like stars to a sailor, a child's
trail of white pebbles in moonlight.

And all week I walked, even the day you
came to class and read aloud lines
I'd marked: lines about maps,
bells, the whine that links

puppy to wolf—a banner of woe, you
called that cry. It was a winter
Wednesday, rain
freezing like glass, smooth as

the pen you used to
sign my book. Edging home
that night, I was shell brittle,
glazed with ice;

but your words were the cord that
pulled me, howling, through the storm,
and, wet and slippery,
delivered me.

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TOM SEXTON

Trumpeter Swans

Wet snow falling through
leaves that have only begun
to turn toward autumn.
The river a milky white.
By dusk the storm is over.
Beneath a new moon
the shimmering of white wings
fading to the east.

Autumn in the Alaska Range

Drive north when the braided glacial rivers
have begun to assume their winter green.
When crossing Broad Pass, you might see
the shimmer of caribou moving on a distant ridge
or find a dark abacus of berries in the frost
on the trail to Summit Lake. Beyond this,
the endless mountains curving like a scimitar.
And in the querulous mind, the yearning heart
a sudden immeasurable calm.

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PETER SCHMITT

Sleeping Through the Fire

When the flames lit up the woods across the lane
I failed to move, lost in some adolescent
slumber. Soon the tallest pines were involved,

but there in that second story bedroom
not once did I waken to the neighbors' shouts—
not as the wind shifted toward the house,

and they ran with CO_2 and buckets
spilling from the lake. Though the walls were thin
I never felt my family downstairs,

their bolting from rooms and slamming of doors.
And through an open window, somehow I missed
the volunteers' truck taking the corner,

the squeal of its brakes and dispersal of men.
Instead, I floated like smoke above the scene,
there at sixteen, even with the fire rising

to the next level. And no one looked for me.
In the morning, I would see the black ring—
the damp needlebed, and charred limbs—but that night

they left me in my room, where I might sleep
a little longer, before unexcusing
daylight called me down at last into the world.

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The Namesake

It wasn't until my twenties, finally,
that I met him, my namesake—or middle name,
at any rate—one evening when my parents
invited him for dinner. Retired
recently, never married, he lived alone
across town in, according to my father,
a nice, spacious apartment. And while he seemed
a lonely man, he had seen the world, or
much of it, and possessed an elegance
one might emulate were it not the product
of natural gifts and long experience.
Through drinks and then dinner he and my father
talked about the war, my mother and I
listening with interest. There was much laughter,
and stories we had never heard before,
a warm, glowing bubble settling over us.
But not once were words spoken about the crash.
He, of course, would have been the one to breach
the matter, if just in passing: the forced
landing, and then my father somehow freeing
himself from the wreckage. Only to see
his copilot, this man sitting next to me,
still pinned inside the cockpit. The smell of fuel.
And then my father smashing the glass, with what
he doesn't remember—his hand?—and pulling
his friend across the tarmac wavy with heat,
thirty seconds later the tanks igniting . . .
Before he left, he raised a toast, this man
I would never see again. And at the door,
they hugged, a little awkwardly, one last time,
nodding, as if to say, yes: this is how
the world left us, one who gave, and one who never
could begin to repay. And then he was gone,
my namesake, leaving me to learn, on my own,
just how one carries that kind of debt, with grace.

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Trial

in memory of my father

You are in for another
of what is now twenty-six

MRI's, and while we wait
we think of you, in the tube,

already a technician
favorite: they know the music

you like—classical—eager
to try a new tape for you,

and we know, though we do not
say so, how each of these scans

amounts to a trial run,
a preparation, hard now

to imagine, as you come
wobbling out, coltish, gaining

your legs, smiling your faithful,
brave smile, how this visit makes

yet one more dress rehearsal
for the ultimate tunnel,

up that slow conveyor belt
where the only sounds will be

not voices or instruments
but the crematory's flames,

busy, thorough, trying to
take their full measure of you.

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Missionaries in Oman: Collecting Shells

We slept on the roof, under towels dipped
every two or three hours in water
from the cistern. The children never uttered
a word. Nights were a kind of reprieve; it dropped
to one hundred and ten. But on weekends
we roamed our cloudless desert beach, looking
for shells, and the sea rose above us, immense,
itself like the curve of an enormous whelk,
cerulean. The ones we couldn't find
in the book we shipped in a box to England.
When they came back, they were ours to christen.
The first, my husband named for me, the children
next; by now, we're almost out of family!
And we can call ourselves home, finally.

Carib

I think of the girl from Port Antonio . . .
Blue Mountains, they called them. But they were always
so shrouded in cloud I could never tell why.
And I remember that old colonial
house, the meals we fixed on the seamed butcher block—
how her skin came to taste of the spices
we used: the nutmeg, and scotch bonnet chilies,
the cinnamon, ginger, and thyme, and the pork
glazed in their marinade. Tabula rasa
you could call our life then, though we wouldn't
have thought so. We kept bringing dishes, loading
our arms: the black beans, the calabaza.
The house still stands. Clouds, sometimes, drift right on
through.
But now I know why they call those Mountains Blue.

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ANDREA HOLLANDER BUDY

Afterwards

Shy, she leans away from him and sighs, thinks
the way the neon sign blinks off and on
through the curtains—gold and blue, gold and blue—
is a sign of something larger than themselves.

He fiddles with her hair, gets up the nerve
to hum a tune he knows she likes, endures
her unresponsive back, observes
the curtains changing colors with the lights.

Talking in bed ought to be easiest—
but silence, that untameable weed, thick
and uncrushable as passion, flourishes between
them now, numb at the mattress's separate edges,

her prom dress upright and stiff in the corner
standing on its layers of crinolines
as though she ordered it there, as though
the girl who had danced in it hours before had not yet left,

as though his tux folded on the chair and the pair
of cuff links side by side on the table meant business,
as though, after all, it wasn't their bodies that mattered
nor the months the two of them had planned this hour.

What words could she use to erase all this and return
to the night before when she modeled for her father
showing him where her corsage would go and where
tomorrow she would pin the boutonnière?

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JANE MAYHALL

The Forbidden

Awful, not to be sleeping in
the same bed with you. The respectability
of medical opinion, that destroys not
just hope, but the actual network of pleasure we
built in life. Never again, the sane encounter—
and the undercover hint of form,
the plasticity of companionship that nobody
mentions. Nightly conjunctions, part

dreams, the ceiling blink of cars from outside
on the country road. The low scatter, and grace-pattering
rain, color of consciousness. That we are
more than individuals. And now rent,
kept apart, not by warring theatrical families,
but by doctors and syringes.

In their distant birdcage, taking
account. Ravenously, I look forward to even
the skimpiest meeting allowed, and our unrealistic
true love. Unfettered and determined
like headlights on a road.

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ROBERT HILL LONG

Intertidal Zone

What it's like to lose the tag end
of childhood on the beach: a struggle
to jerk clean white rock-band-costume
pants past your knees, while your date—

older by years, not months, eyes painted
blue as the lip of an Egyptian
funeral vase—snap-rolls bikini panties
off her ankles, to toss in the sea-oats.

Midnight. On the town side of the dunes
your band, *The Other End*, is breaking down
equipment, having winked and dog-
woofed you away, free, with her, out

of the explanatory zone of house-lights
through the black onshore wind where no one
goes, this late, into the teeth of the surf
except those who want to leave their bodies

now, *now*, and she takes the iron pain
you push at her and plants it knowledgeably,
swift as like a rice shoot, in a place no stranger
than a kid's feet bare in warm marsh mud.

Why then bare your teeth and jerk
like the one time you peed on an electric fence,
unless first sex is already addicted
to death, a practice stiffening and agony rictus.

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I was The Other End singer, used, already,
to rehearsal on rehearsal, one more time
from the top. But this bargain was harder:
her callused heels kick-drummed my buttocks

and shoved my salivary dissolve
a half-inch deeper into her disease, which was
want, or need, or will: which was her last name.
About the first name, I'll say this:

it was Roman, and once a goddess,
but got misspelled on her. No moon rose,
drenched, that night out of the sea for us.
The only light—as we lay there, misfit,

apologizing, drying our genital tears
in the sand—came from grimace after grimace
of surf, like a head arched back in extremity
so its teeth and sightless eyes were exposed

at us. The other light came from the scud
of cloud upon cloud on top of the black water:
another face, another mouth rehearsing
its last breath and seeing nothing

of the great liquid force it lay connected to.
Goodbye, I began to say in my head
to Dyan Will as she relaxed her pretzel grip,
moving away, as she was meant to,

the next day, inland with her professorial family.
She thought me lucky to stay so close
to nights at the beach but if I could meet her
now, twenty minutes, at a table with nothing

but coffee and the thigh-riding skirt she wore
in the snapshot she left me to come to her
memory by, I'd say No—luck laid that night
on us together, only we knew too well how

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to segregate those absolute minutes from all
the days of distant postmarks. So we lay a minute
watching sky and sea magnify and replay the brevity
that had made us old as the world. Then stood,

retrieving the wrinkled stuff we had to wear home,
and dressed, and linked arms around each other's
child-thin waists, and walked over the dunes
where two cars idled, awaiting our separate versions.

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P.H. LIOTTA

How the Eagle Sees It

For me, the Caucasus is just a prison, too.
Though I'm unbound. No rock, after
all's said and done, holds him.
I tear at his liver every day. By night,
obviously, I'm exhausted.

So then the damn thing grows back again.
And he recovers. I dream of that infinite space
I lived in, thermalling on unfettered air,
before the gods handed me this horrid work.

They themselves have no idea what it is they want.
They'll tell me: *Consume his innards, make him suffer,*
but don't let him croak! Taunt him every now
and then just to let him know we care . . .

Our languages, of course, are different—can't understand
a thing he tells me. How could I, how could anyone
understand the voice of such exquisite pain,
the voice inside his singing blood?

They may be gods, but they're all doomed by ignorance.
While I ravage this titan, who screams and thrashes,
does he know I'll never really damage him
enough? Rats gather at his feet
and slaughter one another for the pickings.

Mankind will bring him offerings, autumn
harvests and winter grains. I, meanwhile, remain
so stuffed I cannot fly. (A diet of liver,
forever!) Those fools, they think
Prometheus is just his liver.

[Translated from the Macedonian of Bogomil Gjuzel]

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RICHARD HORNBY

The Globe Restored

JUST ENTERING THE NEWLY RECONSTRUCTED GLOBE THEATRE on the South Bank of the Thames in London is exhilarating. And what better play to inaugurate the first full season within this wooden O than *Henry V*? You pour into the theatre with a mob of groundlings, who pay five pounds apiece (only one English penny in Shakespeare's day, but still a bargain today) to stand in the open yard, rain or shine. The huge stage is covered with rushes, shaded by an enormous roof, and backed by a sumptuously decorated Baroque façade, with trompe-l'oeil rustication, columns, and statuary all painted on the bare wood in garish colors. Behind you are three tiers of galleries, where more genteel folk, paying more, are crammed onto plain narrow benches. (Deciding that my middle-aged feet will give out before my middle-aged back, I pay the extra price.) Musicians play. Actors beating drums or pounding the floor with sticks rush onto the stage. An actor portraying the chorus strides out front and center. The crowd roars. The chorus pleads, "O for a muse of fire!" But the theatre, packed with eager listeners, is a fiery muse itself.

Just before the opening season, I attended a conference on the Globe project, held at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where the deconstructive postmodernists were out in full force. "Phony," "touristy," "Disneyland," they sneered. "Logocentric prejudice," I replied. (I can sling the jargon along with any of them.) "By your lights, writing a book to help us to understand Shakespeare's theatre is good; constructing a building for the same purpose is fraudulent." Since most of those present wrote books, and few had ever constructed a building, the bias was obvious. Deconstructivists may be cynical about "texts," but they are downright vicious when it comes to physical reconstruction.

In fact, the Globe project is, among other things, an extraordinary laboratory for analyzing Shakespeare's drama, and his age. The degree of scholarship behind it is beyond what the folks at Disney ever dream of. (Besides, Disney never recreates historical structures in order to *learn* anything, but only to accommodate what its customers already know.) More important, the Globe is also an exciting new performance space, of a sort not seen anywhere since 1642, when the Puritans (cynical killjoys, like the deconstructivists today) closed down the big public theatres in London. It is as if someone unearthed an ancient musical instrument, began tooting on it, and discovered that it can emit a sumptuous, resonant music no living person has ever before heard.

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For this splendid *Henry V*, the talented tooter was director Richard Olivier, son of the late Sir Laurence. This was ironic, since the father's production and film of the play, back in 1944, was a landmark in theatrical and film history. Produced in the gloomy years of World War II, it was unabashedly theatrical and patriotic. Subsequent versions have been darker, stressing Henry's misgivings, as well as the moral ambiguity of his conquest of the indolent but mostly blameless French; the 1989 Kenneth Branagh film was an outright antiwar tract. Richard Olivier returned to the exuberant approach of his father (though with some significant differences), which was probably unavoidable in the intoxicating new/old performance space.

At the Globe, the rapport between actor and spectator is extraordinary. Audiences cheer the heroes, hiss the villains (here, the hapless French), laugh at the asides and shout back comments. The actors are literally surrounded by audience, above, below, and all around—even the balcony behind the stage has a few watchers. Because of the roof over the stage (the "shadows" or "heavens" in Elizabethan terminology), the audience is actually better lit than the actors, even at night, when widespread electric lighting still favors the yard. There is thus a strong communal feeling among the audience, who can always see one another, rather like being at a sporting event, and very unlike being in the darkened auditorium of a modern theatre, which makes you feel isolated and anonymous. Nevertheless, the high raised platform stage focuses your attention, even though your view is sometimes blocked by two large columns supporting the heavens. The experience is like being in a cathedral; even though the priest is not hit by a spotlight, and your view might well be obstructed by a column or by other worshipers, both the architecture of the surroundings and the rapt attention of your fellows concentrate attention wonderfully. Also as in a cathedral, music and the spoken word are more crucial in performance than visual elements; costume is of course important, and a few props, but the unchanging scenic background does little more than provide gorgeous surroundings for a performance that all but ignores it. We do not think that the Globe, "this cockpit," literally portrays the vasty fields of France in *Henry V*, any more than we think that the stained-glass windows, stone pillars, and ogive arches of a Gothic cathedral during mass realistically depict the little room in which Jesus and his disciples held the last supper.

For this kind of performance to work, the actors must of course be well-spoken. Acoustics at the Globe have greatly improved since the crude "platform performances" of two years ago, as a result of the enclosing of the galleries and the construction of the new stagehouse, but the playhouse is still a large amphitheatre partially open to the skies. Actors need vocal power to fill it, but equally important, they need the modulation and resonance that a trained Elizabethan actor would have had, to convey the abundance of Shakespeare's language. For the inaugural season, the Globe's Artistic Director, Mark Rylance, put together a company of gilt-edged speakers, good actors despite being

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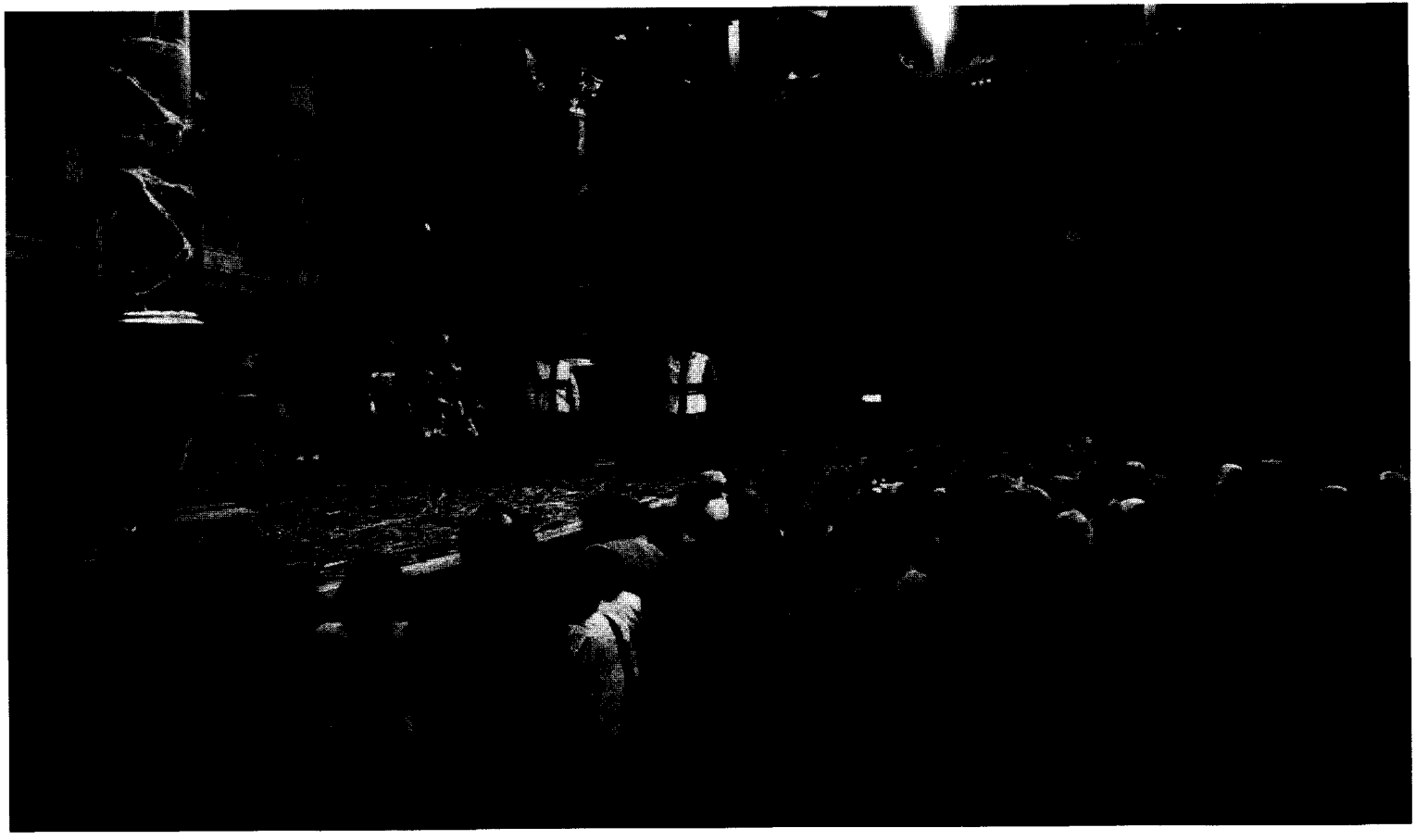

Mark Rylance in the title role of *Henry V*, Shakespeare's Globe, London

Photo Credit: John Tramper

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mostly unknowns, and including a surprising number of Americans. The late Sam Wanamaker, the guiding spirit behind the Globe project, was an American expatriate, while Rylance, though born in England, was raised near Chicago. Thus, from the first, the Globe has been home not just to the British, but, to borrow Auden's phrase, to all "citizens of the great English language."

Of the four productions I saw at the Globe, Richard Olivier's *Henry V* tried to stay closest to what we know of Elizabethan staging. Even the handsome Elizabethan costumes (designed by Jenny Tiramani) were of handwoven and hand-dyed fabrics, and included period underwear—no Calvin Klein jockey shorts here. The cast was entirely male, including Toby Cockerell in a wonderful performance as Princess Katherine, coy and feminine without being effeminate.

Mark Rylance himself played the lead. Amiable and well-spoken, he found a good deal of variety in the role, rollicking and patriotic at the beginning and in "Once more into the breech," quiet and heartfelt in "St. Crispian's Day" (in contrast to Laurence Olivier, whose lusty version has been replayed a million times on radio and television), sweet and funny in the wooing scene with Princess Katherine. Yet in the end, Rylance is more a character actor than a star, more suited to roles like the bourgeois Allwit in Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, which he also played. Balding and rather short ("He is a bit of a runt, isn't he," snickered a nearby groundling, getting into the spirit of the show), Rylance looked awkward running around with a sword in his hand. His best scene was the one in which Henry, pretending to be "Henry Le Roy," wanders among his soldiers at night before battle to check out their morale; he was more convincing and moving as an ordinary gentleman than as a legendary king. I do not mean to belittle Rylance, an actor of considerable talent, but in the end if the Globe is to succeed it needs to attract some charismatic stars. Shakespeare's plays, written for one of the greatest actors of all times, Richard Burbage, are star vehicles. Of course, nowadays celebrity actors would have to take a considerable pay cut to work at the Globe, but back in the thirties, stars like Olivier, Gielgud, Ashcroft, and Richardson would work for peanuts to do Shakespeare at the Old Vic, a tradition that continues today at the Royal National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare Company. Alan Howard, Ian McKellen, Janet Suzman, Judi Dench, Kenneth Branagh! Drop what you are doing, and head for the South Bank of the Thames forthwith.

Malcolm McKay directed *Chaste Maid*, first performed in 1613. One of Middleton's lively "city comedies," it satirizes the fops, pimps, adulterers, and con men found in Jacobean London. McKay's production was hilarious, with much by-play with the spectators from the energetic, distinctive actors. Very different was the production of Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*, elegant and austere, directed by Lucy Bailey. Written in 1610, when the co-authors had taken over from Shakespeare as house playwrights for the original Globe, the play is rather talky and slow, but contains a few good scenes, including one in

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which a man discovers on his wedding night that his wife is actually mistress to the king, who has married her off as a cover. There is also a masque within the play, which Bailey staged with panache.

The only other Shakespeare playing at the Globe was *The Winter's Tale*, directed by David Freeman. In contrast with *Henry V*, it was a case study in how *not* to direct for the Globe. The notes in the program by its designer, Tom Phillips, are a giveaway: "Shakespeare's stage seems to us a strange affair and designing for it sometimes threatens to become a losing battle against its fixed and fairly gaudy structures." The battle was indeed lost. Phillips covered the stage floor with red dirt, which would occasionally get kicked in the faces of nearby groundlings. Sandbags and pieces of big tractor tires lay about the stage, apparently to suggest a post-apocalyptic age, but having no practical function. Actors wore ruddy tunics, with spiky hairdos dyed to match. The scrupulous color coordination of floor, costumes, and hair—not to mention the onstage columns, which are painted to resemble red marble—amounted to camouflage that made the actors all but invisible.

Director Freeman completed the disappearance trick with his busy, meaningless blocking. Actors would sit, stand up, run around, lie on the dirt, roll about, or wrestle with each other ceaselessly. Actors at the Globe must dominate the stage, not be dominated by it. In contrast with the actors in the other plays, who would enter, take a position, and deliver a speech with feeling and understanding, the restless performers in *Winter's Tale*, literally bouncing from pillar to post, gushed with generalized emotion that conveyed nothing. At one point during the performance I attended, an actress even "dried," forgetting her lines, which may seem unrelated to the directing, but when the staging is vague and unrevealing, the actors, like the audience, can easily get lost. Most of the performers in *Winter's Tale* were also in *Maid's Tragedy*, where their superior acting made it clear that in the former play the problems were directorial.

It is instructive that this attempt to use the Globe Theatre for a modern "concept" production failed so miserably. Needless to say, visual unity onstage was not an Elizabethan ideal. It is a product of the proscenium stage, which is pictorial. The proscenium arch acts like a picture frame, which consolidates everything within it, creating a "stage picture," which needs unity to be coherent. But an open stage, like that at the Globe, is not pictorial but sculptural. Rather than relate the actor to his surroundings, the spectator's eye isolates the actor, moving over his costume and face. We do not expect the surroundings to match up with him, any more than we expect the Louvre to match up with the Venus de Milo; the environment sets off the figure rather than harmonizes with it. It is no accident that the most historically accurate production at the Globe—*Henry V*—was also the most theatrical. The Globe is a theatre for the playwright and the actor (Shakespeare was both!), not for the director or the designer, professions that did not even exist in Shakespeare's day.

Elsewhere in London, there was so much Shakespeare that in early fall

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there were even rival, major productions of *King Lear.* Ian Holm played the lead in Richard Eyre's production at the tiny Cottesloe Theatre at the Royal National Theatre, while Alan Howard led in Peter Hall's Company at the Old Vic. Both were excellent, but different. The Cottesloe is a tiny venue, seating only a few hundred, so that Eyre's production was necessarily less grand but more psychological than Hall's, which came off as formal, even operatic.

Ian Holm has become known to American audiences recently through his successful performances in the films *The Big Night* and *Night Falls on Manhattan.* If you rent either of the videos, look especially at his eyes; that wild look, creating the appearance of enormous power held barely under control, was the basis for his performance onstage as Lear. A small man—shorter, in fact, than any of the three actresses playing his daughters—he wore close-cropped gray hair and a longish gray beard, making him look like a howitzer shell. (Nobody called *him* a runt!) A graduate of RADA—in the good old days when all they taught, eight hours a day, was voice—he also had the vocal power and timbre to dominate his followers. Arbitrary, curmudgeonly, his Lear in the beginning was an old king grown overly accustomed to automatic obeisance, literally unable to conceive that he would lose authority by abdicating. The abdication scene was a small gathering around a table; he seemed a family patriarch out of some American television drama, playing his children off against one another, while ordering his courtiers around like servants. He could be frisky and impish, kissing Regan during Goneril's speech. His later scenes on the heath were incredibly poignant, however, because of the intensity of his personal relationships; he even played the "Off, off, you lendings" scene stark naked, looking like a poor, humiliated old man in a nursing home. This was a personal, not a political, tragedy.

Alan Howard's performance, by contrast, was majestic and often bombastic; you certainly never forgot that he was a king. The Old Vic Theatre, originally built in 1819 and retaining a Victorian layout, was the appropriate venue for Howard's basically nineteenth-century, oratorical style. He has an unquestionably superior speaking voice—outstanding even in England, where good stage speech is the norm—but, like a gorgeous actress who shows off her beauty, or a muscular leading man who displays his athleticism, Howard has tended in recent years to flaunt his vocal prowess. In *Lear,* particularly in the early scenes, I felt that he was not connecting enough with his fellow performers; he seemed self-absorbed, and in love with the sound of his voice. Nevertheless, Lear is certainly a vain character, while the opening scene can justifiably be played as a hollow show rather than a genuine test of his daughters' love; Howard, you might say, was trading off the personal side of Lear in favor of the grandiose. Besides, the later scenes were quite well done. Madness, especially of Lear's sort, is self-absorption carried to an extreme, so that the insanity was not only powerful but well grounded.

Both productions had fine supporting casts. Seeing them only a few days apart, I inevitably compared performances. It would be boring to

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list them all, but a few stand out: At the Cottesloe, Finbar Lynch's insouciant Edmund was a serendipitous response to the intimate surroundings; he read the "stand up for bastards" speech quietly, cool as a cucumber, seated with his feet up on a table! At the Old Vic, David Yelland's Kent was notable for the actor's sincerity and intensity. Both productions had excellent performances of the small but pivotal role of Oswald, Goneril's politic, cowardly steward: William Osborne excelled at the Cottesloe, but then Stephen Noonan matched him at the Old Vic. Both productions had Fools who were old men, despite the fact that Lear constantly calls the Fool "boy" or "lad," but Alan Dobie got away with it, his nimble movements, sexual innuendoes, and magic tricks threatening to steal the show at the Old Vic.

Bob Crowley's design for the Cottesloe used a two-sided, gangway stage that yielded extraordinary intimacy but no spectacle whatever. His drab costumes were no help—when Lear cried, "Take physic, pomp!", I wanted to reply, "*What* pomp?" At the Old Vic, however, John Gunter used basically simple designs (the show was running in repertory with several other plays) with great flair. His splendid Elizabethan costumes, plus Mark Henderson's beautiful lighting, gave the production the spectacular effect that this panoramic play needs. I particularly liked the storm scenes, brilliantly accomplished with strobe lighting, a fog machine, and shadow effects on the rear cyclorama. At the Cottesloe, the storm was a small summer shower, but here it was indeed "cataracts and hurricanoes."

Nowadays, even the Russians insist that the distinguished German *régisseur* Peter Stein is the best director of Chekhov in the world. After seeing his German-language production of *The Cherry Orchard* at the Edinburgh Festival in August, I not only agreed, but could not think of any serious competition for the honor. Stein combines an acute literary sensitivity with a theatrical pizzazz, a perfect control of detail with lightness, spontaneity, and vigor. When Stein directs Chekhov, or any other classical drama, directorial elements do not seem added to the text, but to unfold as naturally and inevitably as an opening flower.

Stein's setting, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann, used a long, white, permanent platform, thrust well out into the orchestra of the theatre, with a white curtain behind. The motif of whiteness is central to the play, the white cherry blossoms, the whiteness of the aristocrats' costumes, and the white waistcoat of the parvenu Lopakhin being but a few examples. (Stein's literary perception was, as usual, acute—in a lecture before the performance, he actually explained why Lopakhin must eat a cucumber in Act I, and not an apple, as in some inaccurate translations!) On the deep white stage, Stein would place a few simple pieces of furniture, again usually white or off-white, to suggest the play's three locales; in addition, for the first and last acts, the interior setting was backed by a simplified construction of the cherry orchard in full bloom, a stunning effect that evoked its pure, lost world.

One example of Stein's combination of spontaneity and control, among thousands of possibilities, occurred in the third act: Daniel

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Friedrich, playing the arriviste but good-natured Lopakhin, announced that he had just purchased the orchard. Staggering tipsily, ecstatically, against a wall, he knocked off a sconce holding five lit candles, caught it in midair, gazed at it bemusedly, and then flung it on the floor. None of this action is in the stage directions of the text, but nonetheless seemed so expressive of Lopakhin's mental and emotional state as to appear unavoidable, definitive.

Work of this caliber is only possible with the great Continental repertory companies, with large numbers of outstanding actors on long-term contracts, and lengthy rehearsal periods impossible in the United States or even in Canada or Great Britain. The best American repertory companies will typically have outstanding actors in the leads, but in the classical plays from the past, with their large casts, the talent noticeably thins out. Here, Michael Rastl as the drunken passerby in Act II, or Paul Hör as the Stationmaster who recites snatches of a risqué poem during the party in Act III, suggested depths of character in a matter of seconds, perfectly crafted miniatures. Nonetheless, they did not unbalance the play; Peter Simonischek as Gayev, and Jutta Lampe (one of the greatest actresses in the world, who has worked with Stein since 1970) were so potent that, with a simple glance or gesture, they could make you laugh and weep simultaneously.

A common complaint about the repertory system is that it leads to actors holding on to roles far too long (sixty-year-old Juliets are cited), or to outright miscasting in the first place. This can sometimes happen, but on the other hand, it can also lead to unconventional casting that is illuminating. Friedrich as Lopakhin, for example, was handsome and dapper, the first time I have ever seen the character not depicted as oafish, yet Friedrich's comeliness helped explain why everybody in the play likes Lopakhin so much, despite his basic vulgarity.

At the same "cucumber" lecture before the show, Stein, a charming, self-effacing man (the opposite of the stereotype of the arrogant European director), also spoke of the need for lengthy rehearsal periods for the classics. Someone in the audience asked him about an Italian production he had directed; he practically disowned it, since it had had "only" two months' rehearsal. Five months was a minimum, he felt. In addition, he continues to work on a play through the months and years of its run. Well, the last production of *Cherry Orchard* I had seen was in San Francisco at the American Conservatory Theatre, one of our best companies. It had the standard American rehearsal period—three weeks. Although not without merit, it was a pale shadow on the wall of Plato's cave in contrast with Stein's resplendent version. The moral of the story is that if you want to see the classics done right, it takes not only artistry and time, but government subsidy, the norm in Germany since the eighteenth century. Now that the Republicans are destroying the NEA, whose budget is a tiny fragment of what Germany spends on the arts, it is worth noting what glorious artistic results can come from public expenditure.

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BERT CARDULLO

A Single Girl, a Man Alone

THE TITLES OF TWO RECENT MOVIES, ONE FRENCH, the other American, are oblique reminders of the cinematic swamp of sex and violence through which film art must make its way. Any reader of this column knows by now that it is not the swamp of "entertainment," Hollywood-style or European-fashion, with which I am concerned, but rather the exceptions to it. However, to look only at their titles, *Sling Blade* and *A Single Girl* would seem to observe the commercial rule that non-comedic movies cannot succeed without lots of gratuitous violence—carried out, in this instance, with a sling blade, a small scythe with a short wooden handle—or plenty of steamy sex scenes—initiated, of course, by our horny single girl. But in *Sling Blade* we don't actually see the tool or its use, in a double murder long before the film begins, and the picture's only other episode of bloody violence, in the present, is heard but not shown. As for sex and the single girl, there are no scenes of fornication between her and anyone else in the movie, nor does she ever take her clothes off in view of the camera; indeed, the film's French title, *La Fille Seule*, or *A Girl Alone*, is truer to its meaning than the English translation. Both *Sling Blade* and *A Single Girl*, then, are at best ironic titles, at worst deliciously misleading ones, for each picture is concerned primarily with the exploration of character and environment, soul and setting, not with the mere elaboration of physical action.

In *Sling Blade*'s case, the character of Karl Childers almost immediately evokes a number of literary as well as cinematic antecedents: Lennie Small from *Of Mice and Men* (1939, 1992), "Boo" Radley of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), Kaspar Hauser from *Every Man for Himself and God Against All* (1974, 1993), Forrest Gump from the movie of the same name (1994), Forrest's sage- or savior-like antecedent Chance from *Being There* (1979), and Raymond Babbitt of *Rain Man* (1988), together with the fateful Southern mythology of William Faulkner's novels and the Southern Gothic religiosity of Flannery O'Connor's short stories. But, like the best of his predecessors, Karl is special in more ways than one, not the least because he is acted, and *Sling Blade* was written and directed, by the same man: one Billy Bob Thornton, a native of Arkansas, in a rural section of which this movie was shot. Thornton has either authored or co-authored other screenplays and he has acted here and there in films and on television. Nothing in his previous work, however, could have predicted the stunning achievement of this pro-

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foundly moving, deeply perceptive film, one of the best American movies in some years.

Karl Childers is a fortyish retarded man who, at the start of the picture, is released from the Arkansas state mental hospital to which he was committed at the age of twelve for the killings—with that sling blade—of his mother and her lover. Because of his disability, his parents had treated him almost like an animal, making him live in a shed behind their house and feeding him only "mustard and biscuits," although his mother did take the time to give Karl Bible lessons. This, apparently, was what inspired his affection for the woman despite her and her husband's mistreatment of their son—a mistreatment that horrifically extended to their second boy, whom they abandoned at birth and barbarically instructed the seven-year-old Karl to bury alive. The latter had been tormented as well by the owner of the saw mill where his father worked, together with the owner's son, Jesse, and it was the accidental sight of his mother being bedded by this young man that drove the then twelve-year-old to dispatch them both: first Jesse, for what Karl mistakenly believed to be rape, then his remonstrative mother for her consensual part in the adulterous act. Now, after twenty-five years or so in custody, this docile and slow-moving, slow-witted, slow-talking man is suddenly judged socially viable and discharged, against his wishes, into what for him can only be a foreign, unsafe, and lonely world.

Moreover, he refuses to repent his mother's killing (while feeling bad about his part in his baby brother's demise), let alone Jesse Dixon's, though one might guess that he should do so after having learned to read in the asylum so that he could plow through his beloved Bible over a four-year period. But one would guess wrong, for Karl has doubtless discovered—more cleverly than most—that the Bible does not prohibit the taking of human life per se, only killing without justifiable cause or with premeditated malice. After all, the sixth of the Ten Commandments states, in Hebrew, "Thou shalt not murder," not "Thou shalt not kill"; and how could it be otherwise, when the same Scripture repeatedly mandates judicial execution in a variety of contexts? Clearly, then, Karl believes he had good reason, or justifiable cause—violation of those same commandments—instantaneously to put his mother and Jesse to death, as opposed to murder them. Accordingly, when asked toward the end of an interview conducted at the hospital by a young female college reporter, in *Sling Blade*'s expository second scene—filmed without graphic or bathetic flashback to the Childers' gruesome past—whether he will ever kill anyone again, Karl prophetically replies that he has no reason to kill at present. Furthermore, his two killings are manifestly contrasted with the irrational or unjustifiable slayings by one of his fellow inmates, a vulgarly voluble serial rapist-cum-murderer, through whom we are introduced to Karl in the movie's very first scene.

This scene could be called a synecdoche for the director Thornton's cinematic style, which relies on the spare suggestiveness of the long take combined with the full shot, and which is something like that of another

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vital American director, Jim Jarmusch. In Thornton's case, this realistic shooting style is all the more remarkable in a film whose surface story of violence, abnormality, and incarceration seems to demand a hyperbolic camera of the kind that Oliver Stone deployed in *Natural Born Killers* (1994); and, conversely, all the less remarkable when we realize that, as an actor-director or an *actor's* director, Thornton wishes to preserve the continuity or wholeness of his and others' performances instead of cutting them up and forcibly assigning them this or that spatial prominence. Which is not to say that this first-time filmmaker doesn't understand how to use space and direct focus. For instance, as the opening scene begins, we learn, through the voice-over dialogue of orderlies, that Karl Childers is in this hospital and why, but we haven't yet met him. Then the moving camera finds, and settles on, a patient sitting in profile in the foreground; next to him, facing us, is another patient zestfully telling him a story about a perverted sexual encounter. It takes us a while to figure out that the silent man in profile is the main character, Karl, but his oblique "entrance" is completely in keeping not only with the marginal life he has led up to this point, but also with the bedimmed or bedeviled existence he will continue to lead during the film.

Karl is released from the mental asylum immediately after the interview with the aspiring newswoman, and incongruously he carries with him several books, among them his Bible: his sole possessions. He's headed for his hometown of Millsburg, about twenty miles away, where the kindly hospital director has found him a job in a fix-it shop. Somewhat similar to an autistic savant, Karl is a whiz at mechanical repairs, and he quickly proves his capability as well as his worth to the owner, who allows him to bunk in a storeroom. He also quickly makes friends with a twelve-year-old boy in town named Frank Wheatley, the only child of a widowed mother, Linda (the suicide of whose long unemployed husband violated Biblical doctrine, according to Karl), who works in a grocery store. Frank likes Karl a lot, despite the latter's admission that he once killed two people and was an accessory to the killing of a third person; and, although his own father is still alive, Karl says he has no loved ones left in the world and responds in kind to this gentle but lonesome boy. Linda likes her son's new friend, too, in part because she understands Frank's need for a father figure, if not another sibling, and soon she gives Karl a new place to stay in her garage. He becomes almost a member of the Wheatley family—even after his hostess discovers why he was hospitalized for so many years—except that this family already contains two other quasi-members: Doyle Hargraves, Linda's alcoholic, sadistic boyfriend who toils in construction; and his opposite number, Vaughn Cunningham, the solicitous manager of the market where Linda runs the cash register. Vaughn is no romantic threat to Doyle, since he is a homosexual; but he is a familial rival nonetheless, as is Karl—the gay outcast and the village idiot thus oddly yet aptly united in today's provincial South against the menace of

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rednecked chauvinism. Frank doesn't care for the abusive, ill-tempered Doyle, either (and we wonder why poor Linda does!), so the stage is set for a melodramatic confrontation between the forces of good or innocence and the power of evil.

Unlike a genuine melodrama, however, *Sling Blade* is less about this external conflict than about the internal struggle of Karl Childers to find his place and identity in the world. For Karl does have an inner life, but it is hardly a sentimentalized one for all its understandable simplicity in light of this character's mental impairment. *Vaughn* tries to sentimentalize, or rather pseudo-intellectualize, Karl's interior monologue, if you will, by suggesting at one point over a lunch date at the local Frosty Cream that his friend is really a thinker, but Thornton the writer rapidly undercuts such a view of his protagonist as an idiot savant who is far more savvy than he appears: he has him flatly and unself-consciously respond to Vaughn that he *is* thinking—about whether he should take some of his large order of french fries home with him. Linda herself tries to sentimentalize or romanticize Karl's emotional life by setting him up with Melinda, a mildly retarded fellow employee of hers, but nothing much comes of their meeting except a few halting smiles and a fruitless attempt or two at conversation.

To be sure, there is sentiment in *Sling Blade*, but it is *earned* sentiment, which is the opposite of sentimentalism. To wit: Karl's at once paternal and fraternal relationship with Frank, which frequently finds them delighted simply to be in each other's company, whether walking along in the woods under the midday sun or sitting together by a pond at sunset; Linda's willingness to prepare what inexplicably continues to be his favorite food, "mustard and biscuits," for a hungry Karl in the middle of the night after a nasty fight between Frank and a drunken Doyle; Karl's baptism in the waters of a lake, witnessed by his "family" of Linda, Frank, and Vaughn, shortly after a quiet visit to his baby brother's backyard grave and a failed reunion with his estranged, encapsulated father in their now dilapidated home; and Karl's deliberate acceptance of Vaughn, and of Vaughn's avuncular affection for Frank, despite the Bible's proscription of homosexuality.

Only Frank accepts Karl completely as he is, and it is as much for this boy—who says *he* wants to kill Doyle—as for himself that Karl decides to do the job. Linda's boyfriend, you see, wants to move in with her and maybe marry, as long as Karl is removed from the premises and Frank learns to submit to Doyle's brutal authority. Karl will remove himself from Linda's house, but not before grotesquely dispatching Doyle—whom he ingenuously asks beforehand how to call for an ambulance or a hearse—with a newly sharpened lawnmower blade. Then he makes the 911 call and methodically sits down to wait at Linda's kitchen table. Karl had found his beneficent reason to kill again: to keep the loutish Doyle from harming Frank (possibly Linda, too), whom Karl earnestly says he loves, and to return himself to the state mental institution, where he will be safe for good from the vagaries of life in the big bad world and it in

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turn will be safe from his moralism. At the end of *Sling Blade*, we find the hero of the story back where he was at the beginning, in an identical camera set-up, about to listen to a filthy story told by the same grating serial rapist-cum-murderer. Except that now Karl refuses to listen, telling the man never to say another word to him. He doesn't kill his fellow patient because he no longer has any blade to sling; but he doesn't listen to him, either, because he has grown enough spiritually to recognize that he'd rather remain sealed off from the world, alone with his feelings, than acknowledge its evil or aberration in any form. As if to confirm Karl in his decision, the camera moves into an isolating close-up on him as the sexual predator noisily drags his chair away; then the screen fades to black.

In one sense, Karl is an intolerant, uncompromising man-child, an aberrant being himself; in another, he's a mature person with a consistent code of ethics in the enforcement of which he is prepared to sacrifice himself, except that his code is made possible only by his intellectual naïveté and emotional inexperience in tandem with his asexuality. Billy Bob Thornton, of course, isn't reactionarily calling for a world full of avenging angels named Karl Childers. Nor, like the shallow, mawkish, and unthinking *Forrest Gump*, is *Sling Blade* championing some of the less savory elements of the American character, such as a dogged distrust of intellectualism and a naïve belief in the redemptive power of innocence. Moreover, unlike *Rain Man*, *Sling Blade* bravely concentrates on *Karl's* development and choices, not on the dubious transformation, through contact with him, of a sidekick from a completely self-absorbed character, seemingly incapable of true intimacy, into a caring and sympathetic human being. Karl's evolution is necessarily limited, given his mental subnormality, but it progresses just enough to let us know in the end that he is where he belongs, and the rest of society is where it belongs—where neither can get at the other. Through this most unlikely of protagonists, the film has managed to raise two age-old questions without (happily) providing answers for them: why is there evil or sin in the world; and what is the role of fate, design, or destiny in the shaping of all our lives, especially those led by the most lowly among us?

This brings me to a discussion of *Sling Blade*'s cinematography, which is crucial in the creation of a visual world that mirrors the film's spiritual one. Barry Markowitz shot the picture in color, but he forged the effect of subtle, almost sepia-toned black and white. He did this not only by reducing the amount of light shining on exterior as well as interior scenes, but also by first dyeing the costumes in darker hues and then fading those same costumes, so as to get rid of bright colors like red as much as possible. The result is more than just an optical scheme that hovers between two cinematic worlds, as Karl himself does between the world of the mental hospital and the one outside it. Markowitz's cinematography is the perfect analogue as well for an indeterminate moral universe in which even color isn't what it seems to be, and where existential being must precede ontological essence despite the best

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efforts of humans like Karl Childers, and sacred scriptures like the Bible, to make it otherwise.

As for Billy Bob Thornton's performance as Karl Childers, all I can say is that, like *Sling Blade* itself, it's one of the best by an American in years. To get an idea of the difficulty of acting this part—of creating a man with plentiful emotion, and some thought, buried beneath a caul of remoteness—think how much easier it was for Dustin Hoffman to play *Rain Man*'s Raymond Babbitt, whose mental defect in essence *is* his character. Hoffman had only to simulate or replicate the external being of an autistic man who possessed virtually no interior life, and whose exterior life did not include the making of affective connection with other people. Karl Childers' inner life, in contrast with Raymond's, is the reason for bringing him to the screen, and it was Thornton's arduous task to reveal Karl's humanity or consciousness, not just his freakishness. He does this not merely by creating the right "body" or gestic assembly for his character—a pigeon-toed, heavy-footed, slightly round-shouldered, jut-jawed, blank-eyed, and tunnel-visioned figure—but above all by giving Karl's otherwise halting, monotonous, gravel-voiced speech enough variety, deliberateness, and distinctiveness to convince us that there is an individual residing inside the near-grotesquerie of his physical being.

Sling Blade's cast is made up of other professionals besides Billy Bob Thornton, and of nonprofessionals such as Rick Dial, who plays the boss of the fix-it shop. The best known of the pros is Robert Duvall, and, although he has only one, relatively silent scene as Karl's disaffected father, it is memorable—but less for what it contains than for what it evokes: the specters of Duvall playing Karl's cinematic sire of sorts, "Boo" Radley, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and of the actor himself in his greatest role, as the down-and-out country-and-western singer Mac Sledge in the spiritually styled, linguistically spare *Tender Mercies* (1983). The best of the pros in *Sling Blade* besides Thornton is John Ritter, of all people, who delivers a remarkably sensitive, affectionately comical performance as the gay Vaughn. I have to believe that Thornton the director had something to do with the intelligence and care Ritter brings to his role here, making himself part of a kind of neorealist ensemble rather than turning Vaughn into a flaming caricature of homosexual life.

The weakest member of the ensemble happens to play the only major female part in *Sling Blade*: Natalie Canerday, as Linda. Of all the players, she seemed least connected to what was happening on screen, perhaps because she misinterpreted what I take to be Linda's learned impassivity as her natural passiveness. Canerday is helped, in any event, by Hughes Winborne's judicious editing not only of her scenes but of the entire film, whose 134 minutes a commercially-minded cutter would have trimmed by injuriously removing snatches of its silent stillness. The rest of the performers hold their own—including Lucas Black as Frank in a difficult part, opposite Karl, that could have tempted him either to do

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too much or too little—which is saying something in a movie that, unlike so many features, does not deploy its musical score (composed by Daniel Lanois) as an aural diversion from the eyesore of bad acting.

The soundtrack of *A Single Girl* itself samples Dvořák's melancholy, almost mournful String Quartet No. 1 in A, opus 2, but it does so only during its final third in an attempt to avoid artifice or manipulation, which the picture otherwise manages to accomplish by shooting as much as possible in real time, by recording the actual on-location sounds of a bustling city, and by including actual passersby, not extras, in its street scenes. Predictably, comparisons have already been made between *A Single Girl* and the French New Wave from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, and, as far as they go, these comparisons are valid. Like the products of the *nouvelle vague*, this movie's treatment of character is untraditional and certainly unsentimental; its plot is no real plot to speak of, more a slice-of-life sketch; its attitude toward human behavior or action is experimental or existential in the extreme, without lapsing into the sometimes facile anguish and dread of absurdism; and its cinematic technique is liberated, if no longer experimental, in the sense that the hand-held camerawork, zip pans, compulsively frequent traveling shots, and ever-so-tight framing paradoxically call attention to themselves in this purportedly realistic film, at the same time as their conflicted presence organically underscores the paradox of the central character's life: her division or vacillation between isolation of the self and commitment to another, between breathtaking motion and suffocating inertia.

Benoît Jacquot is the director of *A Single Girl*, on whose script he collaborated with Jérôme Beaujour. Jacquot's earliest pictures, *The Murderous Musician* (1976) and *Closet Children* (1977), have been called austere, even Bressonian, in execution; and at least four times during his career he has turned to novels for inspiration, among them James's *The Wings of the Dove* and Céline's *Voyage to the End of the Night*. Well, *A Single Girl* can certainly be called spare in scope, if somewhat pronounced or conspicuous in execution. Its antecedents, however, are filmic rather than literary: Mazursky's spuriously honest *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), which raises the collective problem of unmarried (actually divorced) motherhood, selfhood, and sexuality without really dealing with it; Bresson's abstractly spiritual *A Gentle Creature* (1969), in which a woman who is married nevertheless lives in unbreachable solitude with a materialistic husband she does not love; and Godard's eclectically essayistic *A Married Woman* (1964), which portrays twenty-four hours in the life of a married Parisienne who is having an affair, for the purpose of creating a sociological study of woman's place in modern culture. Godard's subject is natural history, not the display of conventional Gallic bedroom charm-cum-*tristesse*. And his female protagonist therefore seems neither wicked nor sly; she has, in essence, our sympathy.

The character of Valérie Sergent in *A Single Girl* has our sympathy, too, in spite of her imperiousness, and her quest for selfhood is similar

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to that of Godard's married woman but for the fact that Jacquot's heroine cannot be said to be suffering from bourgeois alienation. We meet up with this proud, working-class, nineteen-year-old beauty early on a gray Paris morning, as she arrives late for a hurried coffee with her boyfriend, Rémi, at a café near her new job. Valérie lives with her divorced mother and is about to begin her first day of work—after a year of unemployment—at a busy four-star hotel as a room-service waitress; Rémi lives with his family as well and is unemployed with no job prospects. Tension is created during this young couple's meeting by the high prices at this dreary café, combined with Valérie's tardiness and attention-getting, tight little skirt; by a camera that is in the characters' faces and cuts between those faces; and by our own inability to tell at first whether it is nighttime or predawn, and whether these two are getting together for drinks-and-a-date or breakfast before work. Then the heretofore evasive Valérie comes out with the truth: that she's four-weeks pregnant and wants to have the child even if that means caring for it on her own, all of this before the peevish-become-perplexed Rémi can say a word. Shortly thereafter his girlfriend shrugs off his financial concerns and rushes out, promising to meet him back at the same café in one hour.

As Valérie strides across the street, around the corner, and into the service entrance of the hotel where she is now employed, the camera of Jacquot's cinematographer, Caroline Champetier, chases after her, then tracks backward in front of her until she reaches her destination. This camera movement will be repeated a number of times during the film, outside on the street as well as inside the hotel, where this new room-service waitress is followed on her rounds through elegant corridors, whose lush ocher-and-gold tones contrast harshly with the dirty wanness of the French capital. On the one hand, the camera calls attention to itself as narrator in its rush to keep up with the hurtling forward motion of Valérie; on the other hand, in its occasional stopping, remaining stationary, and simply looking, sometimes at this young woman walking down a long hallway, at other times at nothing in particular after she has departed the frame, the camera calls attention both to the tedious reality of her work and to its dead-end or second-hand nature. Valérie's job, after all, requires her to do nothing more than enter rooms with a breakfast tray and wake people up, occasionally to interrupt their lovemaking or otherwise invade their privacy—an act, we soon realize, that is equally an invasion of this willful maiden's privacy, especially when she must endure passes from older men. Still, she efficiently persists in her work during this first morning, despite the fact that some of the harassment comes from male co-workers who are sexually attracted to Valérie clad in a tuxedo jacket that keeps slipping off, from female co-workers who are jealous of her good looks and aloof attitude, even from a chilly woman executive who peppers the new girl with questions about her employment history and private life before peremptorily placing her on a yearlong probation.

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So fast and determinedly does Valérie carry out her rounds that she's able to sandwich in a cigarette break and a few alternatingly argumentative and apologetic telephone conversations with her secretarial mother before an hour is up in this ninety-minute movie, and it's time for our waitress to take a real break: her promised return visit to the waiting Rémi at the nearby café. They nearly miss meeting each other there, then, in an attempt to get away from her boyfriend after a disagreement, she's almost run down by a car before he saves her—all of this encounter in a cinematic style that alternates between the unsettling closeness of shot-reverse shot and the intimate oneness of two-shot. Finally, after a hug, a kiss, and a whiskey, and with all the moral grace of self-assured youth, Valérie swiftly breaks up with Rémi on the grounds that their ardent love cannot last forever, and she'd rather abandon him than be abandoned by him. End of romance, back to work.

Except that, after the camera tracks her back to the hotel's entrance to the tune of String Quartet No. 1 in A, opus 2 (heard for the first time here), it doesn't go inside with Valérie and we never see her there again, even though she retains her job. In a jump cut to top all New-Wave jump cuts, *A Single Girl* instead moves forward in time, without a cinematic transition of any kind, to approximately 1½ years later. Now sporting short, pixieish hair and clad in a sundress, Valérie has a son about nine months old who she says resembles Rémi. Her child in tow, she strolls with her mother through a park graced by the pale light of early spring, and the two women first banter, then bicker over family, boyfriends, and the future as Champetier's camera follows them around in a continuous traveling shot. At the end of their walk, as well as the film, Valérie escorts her mother and baby down into the Métro, where she leaves them waiting for a train as she heads up to the street toward a destination unknown. When we see her for the last time, Valérie is solitarily striding away from the camera, which has come to a terminal halt in full-to-long shot; and as she disappears gradually into the amorphous, anonymous crowd of metropolitan Paris, the screen itself fades to black while the haunting strains of Dvořák's chamber music come up on the soundtrack.

Alone and still staunchly in search of herself, Valérie is nonetheless still part of the lonely crowd, and she continues to wait on others in her position as a hotel employee. Moreover, she continues to be connected or committed to a family that now includes not only her mother and a brother, but also a young son, with whom she appears to have forged a strong maternal bond. I mention this last point because even motherly love is no longer a given in what, at least in the West, has long since become the age of narcissism bordering on solipsism. But Valérie Sergent is interested in spirited self-discovery, not mindless self-worship, and such an interest is commendable in a Euro-American culture that, through its objectification of beautiful women, frequently arrests their cognitive development. It's surely no accident that Valérie bemusedly questions any attempt on the part of Rémi and the waiters at the hotel

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to define her as a pretty woman. In a sense, she has a problem in common with Karl Childers of *Sling Blade*: even as he wanted from the world the chance to make others aware of his capacity for feeling or emotional attachment despite his immured condition, Valérie wants from that same world the chance to make others aware of her capacity for thoughtful self-determination in spite of her inherent physical attractiveness.

So mature is Valérie's independence or selfhood by the end of *A Single Girl* despite her age—especially as her autonomous ego is luminously conveyed, more than verbally expressed, by the dark-eyed, oval-faced, olive-skinned, and svelte-figured Virginie Ledoyen—that she is able to take on the role of single mother and thus recognize the claims of someone other than herself. Valérie plainly wants to have it both ways and, on the evidence presented, is succeeding the last time we see her. To what extent her having it both ways is a function of her youth ahead of everything that dissipates youth, like life itself and the rigors of manual labor, the film voguishly but not fatally declines to consider. Karl Childers, for his part, doesn't get to have it both ways, to be both a free man and a supervised inmate, to act without restriction yet with constraint; so this matricide sacrifices the pleasure of his own trudgingly sentient maturation for the sake of the welfare of another single mother and her son. By doing so, Karl sentences himself to life in both senses of the word—a life that he shares incandescently with his soulmate of a distant kind, Valérie Sergent.

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JOSIAH FISK

Sound but No Picture: Two Stagings of Baroque Opera

THOSE PESKY MCARTHURS! IF THEY'D BEEN A DECENT BUNCH, Larry wouldn't have had to go and kill them. All but the youngest, that is. He dragged that poor Brenda back home with him and now he swears he's going to keep her there for the rest of her life, and even though he's off on a very long trip now and nobody knows when he's coming back, she is under express orders never to fall in love or have children, and that includes running off with Larry's son, Dave, who at the moment is into a cult led by a charismatic woman who teaches her followers that males and females can live together in bliss simply by being completely ignorant of sexuality.

Let me pause here and ask: would it help if I told you that Larry's name is actually Theseus, and that it wasn't the McArthurs who had gotten him so rattled but the Pallantids? Or if I told you that Dave and Brenda do get married, after Dave is killed and then brought back from the dead, because they are in fact Hippolytus and Aricia, and it was already ordained by Jupiter that in their case Cupid would win out over Diana?

Naturally it would help in one sense, because you would realize that we were talking about some plot—in this case, the plot (and really just a background fragment of it) of Simon-Joseph Pellegrin's libretto for Rameau's 1733 opera *Hippolyte et Aricie*. But it wouldn't help you understand the story itself, or the social and psychological realm the characters inhabit, or the various moral, emotional or political symbolism, that may lurk within the text. All of these remain beyond reach of our everyday experience and, for most of us, beyond reach of our educational and cultural backgrounds. (As for whether telling the story in updated language makes it feel any more contemporary, I leave it to the reader to decide.)

In trying to make sense of a story like this, the job isn't made any easier by the fact that we still have murders and marriages and cults (even Dianic cults, according to a recent *New York Times* article on witchcraft). In fact it only confuses the issue, because it is evident from the context of the libretto that the meanings these concepts have for us are radically different from anything that would allow the story to speak to us directly. Our murders are the concern of the police and the tabloids, our marriages anything but the idealized romantic unions of

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two virgins, our cults a matter of crackpot beliefs and psychological manipulation. Time's work has been to play the little prank in the first paragraph in reverse: the names of the characters are the same, while everything else about the story has changed—not because the story itself has changed, but because the ground beneath it has shifted.

Still, there is one dimension of *Hippolyte* that does reach us, and that is Rameau's music. No doubt in our present-day performances we speak the language of this music with something of an accent, since it is not only a second language for us but one we've had to teach ourselves. For that matter we also *hear* it with an accent, if you will: as critics of the early music movement are always reminding us, our ears are different now, and can never be the same. There are enough comments about Rameau, and about *Hippolyte* in particular, to make it clear that his contemporaries had to struggle to comprehend his music, even as they acknowledged the greatness of his talent. To encounter any of these comments—say, Rousseau's famous gripe that Rameau's accompaniments are "so confused, so overcharged, so incessant, that the head can hardly tolerate the continuous din of the instruments"—is to be confronted with just how different our ears have become.

Nevertheless, this music speaks to us, and with a wholeness and immediacy that make it unlikely that our appreciation is merely a grand misunderstanding. Aricia's circumstances may seem nonsensical to us, and there may be no decent analogue to her Diana within our mental horizons, but when she sings of the sacredness of a temple dedicated to this goddess, whose creed she is on the verge of being forced to adopt, we not only find the melody appealing in its beauty but affecting in its portrayal of a particular emotional state—in this case, the state of preparing to accept duty over desire.

Even here, we have to stretch to feel the most important nuances, for while Aricia's attitude is tinged with regret it is mainly a complex and rather advanced form of stoicism. It is not merely an acceptance of the situation, but a thorough and sincere effort to embrace an unchosen fate. Aricia displays a level of awe and respect for the Dianic way that few of us in her circumstances would find possible or desirable. We'd be more inclined to rail at the injustice, to bemoan the wasting of our lives and the loss of our dreams, perhaps above all to seek the sympathy of others. It seems clear that Pellegrin and Rameau meant for us to see in Aricia's attitude a reflection of the strength and nobility of her spirit, but nowadays we would find the behavior she displays to be weak and self-deluded, not to mention naïve. "Admirable" would be far down on the list of possible interpretations.

This one instance gives a sense of what much of opera, but Baroque opera in particular, is up against literally every moment that it seeks our attention. From our vantage point the social milieu is skewed, the behavior incomprehensible. There's almost no action in the sense that we think of it today, and anything that might lend itself to juicy presentation—battles, murders, shipwrecks—either has already hap-

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pened or takes place offstage. The whole affair is situated in a mental landscape whose features are largely alien to us, and while we may enjoy the music without much special effort, unless we can construct some approximate living model of this mental landscape within ourselves, through a process that must begin with patient study and end with an elaborate act of will, we can never know the happy feeling of watching Baroque opera with spontaneous comprehension.

The *Hippolyte* that came to the Brooklyn Academy of Music this past spring honored, in a sort of backhanded way, this perceptual difference between the musical and dramatic sides. The music, especially the instrumental playing, was in the best high authentic style available, while the staging mixed period conventions with modern ones. The fact that even the most rigorous of historically informed music-making is also a mix of period and modern conventions does not erase the crucial distinction here. No element in the playing of William Christie's Les Arts Florissants or the singing of his remarkable cast, whether identifiably modern or not, sought attention for its anachronism. But Jean-Marie Villegier's staging frequently used elements that were designed to be read as modern, and to be seen in disjunctive contrast with those elements that were meant to be seen as period—for example, having a character in period costume charm the Furies of Hell by handing each of them a white balloon.

It's possible to argue that Villegier's approach is in fact the more honest one, since his staging never tried to pretend it was something it wasn't. It's also possible to suggest that he brought us closer to the original by translating certain elements into analogues we could recognize. I find neither point convincing, probably because I found the staging convincing only when it stopped aiming for what everybody these days seems to be calling "frisson" and got down to the business of presenting opera. Decorative period costumes in an austere but classically proportioned set work well, because you can focus on the opera without being distracted by the means that are being used to present it, even though the means are in some aspects quite modern. The balloon incident simply backfired, taking a scene that is a complex and unexpected blend of the somber, the suspenseful and the whimsical and reducing it to Ronald McDonald in Hades. The point is not just that using obtrusively modern elements squashes the richness of the original, but that it signals that the director doesn't trust the original, that he'd rather paint a little mustache on it than risk being seen as earnest, because earnest is very uncool.

Mustache painting is of course what BAM audiences come for, and the balloons drew titters of delight. (My quarrel with this crowd isn't their love of trends or their feelings of superiority to mainstream culture consumers, it's that they don't seem to realize they are culture consumers too, just ones who buy a different kind of product.) But they also responded to the music. That is no surprise. The score itself is a marvel,

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all the more so when you consider that even though Rameau was fifty when he wrote it, it was his first foray into opera. Christie used a new edition by Sylvie Bouissou that largely restored the opera to its original 1733 configuration. Ironically, because it was never produced in this form at the time, we in the late twentieth century have been the first to hear it.

Mostly what Christie did was to give the music his patented treatment, which is scholarship animated by taste—along with, let us not forget, hundreds of hours in rehearsals and previous performances, mostly paid for by the likes of France Télécom, the Conseil Régional de Basse-Normandie and other French institutions. (Christie's subsidies, lavish by comparison with anything in this country, are often invoked as an argument for greater government funding of the arts; I don't disagree, but I wonder how many of those who make this argument know just how much of a taskmaster Christie is, and just how much of the success of Les Arts is because it is run as an autocracy to an extent that few of Christie's fellow Americans would tolerate.)

Christie has been working the territory of the French Baroque since the late 1960s, and it seems safe to say there is no more convincing advocate of this music alive. His casts are often said to have no stars, which is true only in the happiest way: they have a fierce sense of ensemble and wonderfully matched talents, all of them strong (at an unstaged *Dido and Aeneas* at Tanglewood several years ago, the singers stood on the stage *in front* of Christie and the musicians, unable to see him even with peripheral vision; in spite of this the coordination was flawless). Stars or none, there was, by common consent, a standout among the *Hippolyte* cast, and that was Lorraine Hunt in the role of Phaedra. The production has been recorded on Erato, and, like most of the rest of Christie's CDs, it's well worth owning.

The Boston Early Music Festival and Exhibition has been held every other year since 1981, and has emerged as the major event of its type in the country. During most of BEMF's nine incarnations, the centerpiece has been an opera production, either staged or unstaged. One of the early festivals mounted a Handel opera that attempted period authenticity down to the stage machinery. The festival of four years ago offered an attractive *Orfeo* of Monteverdi, this time with staging that made use of techniques unknown in the composer's day but not insensitive to its tastes; there was, for example, a unit set whose uses were extended by having panels rotate to reveal different images on their other faces. There were good period costumes, good singing, good playing. If the musical effect was less ravishing than, say, Christie's usual work, it was still quite impressive for an ensemble put together for the occasion. You left the theater satisfied and with a fine idea of the piece itself, which is no small accomplishment.

This year BEMF tackled a different Orpheus opera, Luigi Rossi's *L'Orfeo*. Two lutenists, Paul O'Dette and Stephen Stubbs, were the

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artistic directors, and Jack Edwards directed the staging. The most notable element, visual or musical, was the dazzling array of largely period-style costumes. These had been designed by Robin Linklater and made by the costume department at the Drottningholm Court Theatre in Stockholm. Their opulence might not feel out of place there, though somehow in Boston's Emerson Majestic Theatre, an incompletely renovated vaudeville house, they seemed a bit over the top.

Then again, over the top is undoubtedly what *L'Orfeo* is all about. This work is as much a soundtrack as an opera, the musical component of a grand spectacle mounted in Paris in 1647. The program notes suggest that it was "the most important cultural event of the mid-seventeenth century"—not exactly a modest claim, but certainly true if most important can be equated with most extravagant. The circumstances of its origin are centered in the political machinations of Cardinal Mazarin, the powerful French cleric who started life as an obscure Italian named Mazarini. The story is long; suffice it to say that it ends badly, with Mazarin being attacked by the Fronde in a wave of anti-Italian spirit, for which the tremendous expense of *L'Orfeo* was a leading provocation.

Is *L'Orfeo* an obscure masterpiece? It may be, though I did not find evidence of it in the music, as charming and as expertly played as it was. In vain I tried to remember a single tune—hardly a challenge with Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, or with *Hippolyte*, which is studded with catchy musical gestures, often repeated a shameless number of times, not at all unlike the "hook" of a commercial pop song. *L'Orfeo* is called a *tragicommedia per musica*, but tragicomedy turns out to be an unfortunately literal description: Rossi and his librettist, Francesco Buti, tend to aim for balance by jerking us from one mood to another, without much bothering to offer emotionally satisfying connections.

It is with a work like *L'Orfeo* that the lost nature of the historical context becomes, for me at least, a fatal difficulty. If it's true that the historical music we listen to today was created for different people and different circumstances—created, in many cases, for circumstances where it would not have received careful or repeated listenings, let alone scholarly study or analysis—it is no less true that the reason we keep it around is because it offers something on its own terms. To know more about the historical context of a Schütz motet or a Debussy suite is always fascinating, but it doesn't make the music sound better or worse. With the Rameau, the music is still accessible to us even if the substance of the opera isn't. With the Rossi, so closely tailored to its time and place, we don't have the luxury of ignorance when it comes to historical context—not even, I think, with the music.

In a certain way, works like the Rossi, which was made for a specific occasion and will probably never have the same impact again, are more faithful to their clients' ambitions than a work like Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, which may mean more to us today than it ever did to Francesco Gonzaga, the man who paid to have it written and mounted. But composers had their own concerns, and in finding ways to make music

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more self-contained and less occasional, they ultimately found their revenge on the condition of servitude. Self-contained meant portable, and that meant a life for the music beyond the immediate circumstances of its creation. Thus was born classical music's most distinctive characteristic.

It's very possible that *L'Orfeo* is a great opera—great not in the sense we today require of old music, that it arrive with everything necessary to connect with it, but great in the way that it connected with the knowledge and expectations of its audience or in the way it brought together the myriad resources at its disposal. Unfortunately, it is very hard to know. The only way to find out would be to work ourselves into a condition to appreciate its greatness firsthand.

One thing the BEMF *L'Orfeo* did do was to trust its material. It did so rather earnestly, which is not necessarily what the piece demands; in the earnest re-creation of an amusement, one perceives both the amusement and the earnestness. But because it did trust its material, I am less inclined to think of its shortcomings as stemming from the production, and more inclined to think of them as traceable to the work itself, and even more inclined to see them as signs of our own incapacity for registering what the piece is all about. What's the answer? Not balloons, anyway, and maybe not earnest attempts at fidelity. It may not lie with the staging at all, but rather with ourselves and our mental landscapes. If we are interested in Baroque opera, then let's be interested. Let's study, let's listen, let's make the effort to go where the operas live rather than expecting them to come to us. And in confronting our unchosen fate of being imprisoned in a world that is so far from what intrigues us, why not adopt a little of Aricia's attitude? It might teach us a few things about strength and nobility of spirit, if we happen to feel like learning.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

The Public Domain

IN AMERICA AT CENTURY'S END, we are apt to think of "public art" as a site of endless contention—e.g., the court battle to remove Richard Serra's steel wall in New York's Foley Square, NEA funding disputes, strident graffiti and somber mounds of Earth Art, Maya Lin and Jenny Holzer. Each case, or controversy, seems to take us down a different path, emphasizing the need for more public art of stature or the shallowness of so much of what is out there already or the pointlessness of trying to satisfy all constituencies. How pleasing to be reminded once in a while that acrimony is not inevitable. Artist, public, and cultural elite have had their moments of common cause.

In the summer of 1997, the Museum of Modern Art in New York looked at two of those moments, products of radically dissimilar temperaments, societies, and needs. "Paris—the 1890s," a print exhibition, occupied the more well-trod path, though the nature of the subject always allows for satisfactions of one kind or another, part nostalgic and part aesthetic. (Only Jazz-Age Manhattan rivals fin-de-siècle Paris for such unadulterated, even inexhaustible mythmaking.) The first galleries concentrated on the achievements in lithography, etching, and woodcuts of several Nabi and Post-Impressionist artists whose work was often published in portfolios and made available to private collectors by enterprising souls like André Marty and Ambroise Vollard. Bonnard, Vuillard, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Maurice Denis, Paul Signac, Odilon Redon: the major names, like the terrain itself (from the Japanese influence on contour and perspective to the Art Nouveau curvilinearity), do not yield any surprises at this point, at least not in a broad survey context. (The minor names—Henri-Gabriel Ibels, Paul Ranson, Ker-Xavier Roussel—will always be minor and little-known.) There was an invigorating aspect to this show, however, and that was in its second half in the less genteel and more crowded display of printmaking as it moved from the dealer's backroom and the connoisseur's study to the public arena, taking over kiosks and outdoor wall space, giving a new look to sheet music and magazine advertisements, revivifying theater programs and dust jackets. Some of it borders on the tacky—Bonnard's 1891 commission for a Debray's champagne poster is right up there with Scott Fitzgerald writing streetcar ads before beginning his first novel—and some of it is highly literary or visually complex (e.g., Bonnard's famous 1894 poster for the avant-garde journal *La Revue Blanche* or Vuillard's 1894 ad for Becane, the Gatorade of its day).

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But the bulk of these prints for vast public consumption was accessible, amusing, and timely, celebrating nightlife and consumerism, pageantry and appetite. Their success had to do not only with the talent of the men who made them, but with the technical innovations they were lucky enough to benefit from (especially the advent of multiple-color printing) and an audience that exulted in them. The call to buy delicious new products, to be proud rather than ashamed of the Moulin Rouge, and to think of the streets as an extension of the dramas enacted indoors spoke to a great moment in middle-class life. The alienation of High Modernism is nowhere in sight.

Yet, while Jane Avril and Yvette Guilbert are always going to be what people most remember from a show like "Paris—the 1890s," the political dimension of France under the Third Republic was not neglected at MoMA, either. Even without the Dreyfus Affair, these were not placid times. Religious and class divisions were intense, and official corruption was spiraling out of control. In Félix Vallotton's woodcut *La Charge* (1893), gendarmes slice and cuff their way through a crowd of street demonstrators, and Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen's prints (in the form of posters, periodical illustrations, and sheet-music covers) depict striking workers and lines of impoverished widows. Yet it is hard to focus for long on the troubles that gave rise to these scenes. A well-drawn hand, an unusual composition, a new style of lettering: there is always something to carry our thoughts away from whatever inspired the drawing. Thus art, even at its most sympathetic, sabotages politics—if the art is serious art and the politics urgent and alive. Activists or governments with an agenda (are there any other kind?) look warily on artists and their dual motives, with good cause.

A walk to the adjacent galleries at MoMA last summer provided more material for this train of thought. For here was art at the service of politics, or public life and mass needs, as it never was again in our time. "Stenberg Brothers: Constructing a Revolution in Soviet Design" exhibited a vast body of work, primarily posters, that aimed to be part of the remaking of Russia after the October Revolution, the remaking of modern art, and the remaking of the landscape of the modern city. The result was everything one might expect: proud, stark, vital, euphoric, earnest, doomed. It was also a few things one would not expect, such as caustic and witty.

The Stenbergs—Vladimir (1899-1982) and Georgii (1900-1933)—were founding members of the Society of Young Artists in Moscow and among the most energetic participants in Lenin's call for a public art that discouraged despair or ennui and beckoned everyone to rise to the challenges of the moment. The brothers' purely aesthetic aspirations were never a negligible aspect of their story—some of their "nonobjective compositions" circa 1920 suggest that they would have been at home with pioneers of abstraction such as Vassily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich—but they were fully of their time in wanting to put their skills to work in service "to the people." "The people" did not need

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abstract watercolors; they needed rousing, purposeful, and comprehensible public imagery. Such was the Stenbergs' sympathy for the new order that they even adopted a collectivist authorship: a simple "2 Stenberg 2" was their artistic signature on many of their movie posters and book jackets. In terms of style, in their use of bold lettering and abrupt cropping and angling, they were not especially eclectic, but neither were they insensitive to the texts they were promoting. On the contrary. The poster for *October*, for instance, smartly evokes that film's combination of newsreel reconstruction and brisk narrative; the dynamic collage effect honors the montage of Eisenstein. Bustling cities and ardent workers figure in numerous posters, and so, as Bolshevik dogma required, various elements of traditional urban printmaking—picturesque vistas, languidly sensuous women, the private moment—were cast aside. At intervals, the American Precisionist movement comes to mind. The abstract qualities of office buildings and factory towers in the paintings of Sheeler, Demuth, and Ault were an inspiration to many artists in the 1920s. But the comparison quickly breaks down. The Stenbergs' Soviet urban panorama is less static or contemplative, less sumptuous, edgy with an undertone of a "a people on the march," as in their cover for *30 Days*, an illustrated monthly, in which the tilting skyscrapers and smokestacks might just as easily be cannons at the ready. If the sinuous line, the lovers' stroll on a boulevard, and the sight of a well-filled skirt from a cafe perch have been banished from sight, so has the impulse to divorce a skyline from its link to the citizens who built it and their need to be further stirred to labor and create.

A view of the Stenbergs as humorless ideologues would be quite off-target, though. When a poster for a documentary about a pencil company is clever and eye-catching, concerned with odd facial expressions as much as machinery, you know you are in capable hands. In fact, Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg often showed their real flair with just those subjects—Soviet and foreign films, particularly comedies—that prompted them to be most droll, illustrating stories of ordinary people in over their heads or victimized by ruthless bosses. Most of the movies are too obscure for us to know how much credit should go to the original source, but the Stenbergs themselves had an eye for the lightly zany, for the way in which individuals might not be lost in the larger construction—of the busy cut-out shapes of the poster or the context of their lives. We see it in the daffy expression of the woman in *The Girl with the Hat Box* (1927), the perkiness of the woman in *High Society Wager* (1927), and the dazed look of the unjustly accused man in *I Am a Detective* (1927). What did the commissars make of this much quizzical expressiveness, this much whimsicality? But we know the end of the venture. Once Stalin took control, the parameters of creativity were set and Socialist Realism was the only permissible mode. The visual bounty, that blend of Modernist collage technique and community-minded ends, was over long before the Second World War.

In a more minor vein, but also of great interest (at least to this viewer),

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was the small selection of the brothers' costume and set designs that concluded the exhibition—works of gouache, pencil, and collage on board for 1920s productions of *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Hairy Ape*, and *Saint Joan* that must have been magical evenings in the theater. For that matter, the vitrine near the end of "Paris—the 1890s" containing a small sampling of playbill cover illustrations—e.g., a Vuillard drawing for an 1896 production of Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*, a Munch drawing for an 1897 *John Gabriel Borkman*—has lingered in memory longer than I would have thought. Another reminder of a loss, I suppose, of a time when educated people left their homes at night to gather in public places to see dramas more complex than "Seinfeld" or "Mad About You."

In America, the story of public art has never been quite as inspiring. We have no exact equivalent of the Vuillard-Lautrec poster period or the Stenbergs' ambition. Between a native uneasiness about open displays of sensuality and a skepticism about the social utility of any art, it's a spotty record. Think about the history of our public sculpture. What better sleep-inducer than a visit to the Engelhard Court in the American wing of the Metropolitan Museum? Not even the gloss of "historical artifact" makes the overfed burghers of John Quincy Ward Adams, the fake naughtiness of Saint-Gaudens' Diana, and all those dying marble Indians and bronze nymphs more palatable. Has it changed much as the decades passed? My hometown in Connecticut has been raising funds for ages for a monument to the area's World War II veterans. The result, unveiled last year: a half-size facsimile of the Iwo Jima Memorial in Washington, tilted flag and all, surrounded by eternal flames.

The graffiti wars of the late seventies and eighties heated up the issue a good deal. Most of what Sidney Janis and others imported to their galleries from New York's subways wasn't very powerful, or even interesting, out of its original context. (In everything from African sculpture and Byzantine icons to "outsider art," dealers and curators strangely tend to resist the idea of context changing meaning.) But the success of Keith Haring in the early 1980s, even more than of his East Village *confrères* Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kenny Scharf, pointed to the crossover of previously antithetical worlds and the triumph of a certain kind of public creativity, one that claimed a multiple status—as an art commodity to be sold in galleries, as an emblem of Pop culture raucous enough to make Warhol & Co. look prissy, and as an anti-authoritarian gesture of the streets.

I confess I have no interest in, or feeling for, Haring as an artist, none whatsoever. Lethargy overcomes me when I look too long at his simplified, thickly contoured human figures, exploding penises, barking dogs, and UFO saucers. Yet if a museum examination of his career was inevitable, it also seems to me that the Whitney has done it right with its posthumous retrospective, or as right as it could be done. Yes, there was a silliness to the wall-plaque emphasis on the "special" or unique connection between Haring's life and his work. Except for a handful of

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artists whose biographies would be interchangeable with those of CPAs or librarians, what artist's work isn't the product of his particular background and individual experiences? But Haring in the context of radical changes in modern American life, in the context of New York City, the arena of the subways, the East Village in the eighties, AIDS and the government's indifference to the crisis, the gay club scene, contemporary music, and a host of other factors—that makes sense. And it was an approach that called for a re-imagining of the museum's traditional ideal of space and comfort.

At the Whitney, a crowded foyer with the walls done up as lined yellow tablet paper and vitrines jampacked with Haring's early drawings, youthful snapshots, and family and seventies-era memorabilia gave way to a narrow passageway lighted by a single naked bulb that ended with a television screen replaying a CBS News report on the graffiti artist's much-publicized arrests on various subway platforms for drawing on the black, blank advertising paper on the stations' walls. A second news clip dealt with the art world's ecstatic discovery of Haring (much to Dan Rather's amusement) and then, finally, we were ready for the third section of the exhibition, a barnlike studio covered helter-skelter, floor-to-ceiling, with Haring's drawings and paintings. You've been living under a rock if you don't know the thematic line-up: Everyman playing with his dog, playing with himself, bending over or thrusting forward in anal copulation, awaiting the alien ships from beyond. For financial reasons that ultimately had a cultural significance as part of his anti-fine art stance, Haring often worked on Con Edison tarpaulins instead of canvas, and these gritty, sometimes buoyant, sometimes monotonous images were absorbed at the Whitney—an unintended effect, I'm sure—to the noise of jackhammers above us (the construction work on the fifth floor of the museum continues apace). Later in the exhibition, one had to push open a tightly hinged door to walk through to a small re-creation of a corner of the Paradise Garage, a club where Haring was a regular, and from that room we moved into the last few galleries, which were the vast, bright, open spaces of an artist who had become a hot property, who had "arrived." It was an "arrival" that filled Haring with ambivalence.

It was also an ambivalence that could never be satisfactorily resolved. Haring wanted to make artworks celebrating sex and warning about AIDS for the widest possible audience—subway riders to T-shirt wearers—but his own artistic ambitions for more complex compositions, less neatly reproducible imagery in something closer to the form of more traditional painting, worked against that goal, as did his own feelings about "the system" and its rewards. A furious late painting of a money-grasping, media-manipulating hydra, its red tongues flicking out in all directions, holding a pair of scissors to snip off the genitals of a naked male, is a comment on the televangelical crusade of the eighties: the Bible clutched in one tentacle tells us that much. But the devouring demon might just as easily be the marketing machine which Haring, the

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artist turned logo-maker and advertising tool, was caught up in in his last years. A manhood-depriving situation, in its way, and one that breeds a ferocious discontent. And the problem, in the end, is that we drown in all this anger (sometimes covert and sometimes explicit) in Haring's work. Anger will not sustain art. Anger alone isn't sufficient to sustain good propaganda, as the Stenberg brothers would attest. The rightwing drive to erase gay life and sexuality from public view has to be fought in better ways than watching Tom Selleck and Kevin Kline smack lips in *In & Out*, but tidal waves of posters of men with more and bigger erections won't register as anything other than petulance, a campaign imbued with the dead-end energy of Queer Nation rather than a convincing testament to gay love and lovemaking.

The attention Haring received in his short lifetime (he died in 1990 of complications from AIDS) is hard to dissociate from the sympathy factor involved with AIDS deaths and with the post-Stonewall attention to gay cultural politics. But there is no denying that Haring was popular with disparate audiences and that his art took on an active public life of its own, in ways that the work of infinitely more talented gay artists who were also PWAs (e.g., David Wojnarowicz) did not. In Haring's case, the aura and the audience were in synch. Some exhibitions function best as statements about their times—the anxieties and shibboleths of the age, the machinery of celebrity, the creation of a persona, bohemian and establishment overlap—and the retrospective at the Whitney was one such show.

Art critics are like cowpunchers, the painter John Sloan liked to tell his classes at the Art Students League in the 1930s. "They want to brand you with a label and then they think they know you. That makes them happy." Little has changed in the ensuing decades, though we could just as easily substitute the words "book reviewer" or "political journalist" for "art critic": commentators in every field—much like the general run of museumgoers, readers, or voters—are more comfortable with labels and categories than ambiguous realities. So it is always a healthy thing to spend time with artists who quietly defy the process. "Alex Katz Under the Stars: Landscapes, 1951-1995" at the Portland Museum of Art in Maine last summer allowed for just that experience.

In this ample retrospective, the focus was not on Alex Katz the Pop portraitist we all know, but on Alex Katz the less well-known painter of beaches and trees. The show, which is traveling to Baltimore, West Palm Beach, and New York early in 1998, covered a wide ground, though none of it was strictly representational or even expressionist. The small paintings from the 1950s, carefully limiting their content and complexity (it was hard not to think of Milton Avery here), were very much about control and formalist issues, about nature as an inspiration for color and mood rather than as a source of detailed reproduction. That original goal was evidently a constant for the artist. Sometimes it led to a fascination with elegant patterns, as in the tiger lily paintings of the

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sixties, and frequently to an interest in the severe cropping of images, as in *Late July* (1967) and *9 P.M.* (1990). By the 1970s, Katz's color could be intentionally unreal and even whimsically alienating; the greens of *Sugar Maple* (1978) are as harsh as the blue leaves and sky are fake and stagey. Some of the later paintings allude to urban life, often in a somber vein—*Bird* (1992) evokes a gray sky and a gray form in flight over a snow-covered water pipe and rooftop—and the later large triptychs take the notion of "landscape" as close to abstraction and as far from realism as it can go and still be tethered to the original visual experience. In fact, the tension between those concepts, worked out over a forty-year period, was one of the appeals of this savvy exhibition.

On a more intimate scale, a narrow cul-de-sac gallery (more like a tight alley) showed, to great effect, Katz's minuscule collages of bathers and coves—spare and clever, every one of them—from the 1950s as well as a few similar works from the 1990s. On the rainy August afternoon I was in Portland, this was the space people were jostling to enter and linger in, with more animation than viewers were displaying even for the Andrew Wyeth survey upstairs. The flat, cool wall-sized faces and stylized group portraits that denote "an Alex Katz" were, happily, the furthest thing from our minds. "Alex Katz Under the Stars" was about an artist at play (albeit serious play), not about a career in the making.

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HAROLD FROMM

Humanities Beleaguered

IF LAWRENCE W. LEVINE'S *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* was a multicultural reply to Allan Bloom's closing of same, then John. M. Ellis' *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities*[1] turns out to be a reply to Levine, even though his name does not come up in the course of this book. Levine was pretty bullish about American diversity, criticizing those who "have applied the term 'political correctness' to the expanding study of the roles played by a wide variety of Americans in shaping our culture and our society. They have employed the same term to denigrate the most heartening growth of sensitivity to and awareness of human differences and vulnerabilities our universities and indeed our nation have ever experienced."[2] Levine regarded the melting pot as little more than Anglo-conformity and saw hostility toward immigrants as a running theme in American culture. Although he had much of value to say about the benefits of "diversity," its darker, more nihilistic side eluded his excessively rosy field of vision. As long as the police in affluent suburbia arrive quickly after a call to 911, elite intellectuals can afford to be generous to each and every "other." But the civilization that enables open-minded generosity, paradoxically enough, depends on a sense of community whose cost entails a certain amount of repression.

John Ellis' book attempts to redress this imbalance, with particular emphasis on the consequences of social agendas in the humanities. Although a number of his arguments have been employed before—notably by Camille Paglia and Alain Finkielkraut (whom I have earlier discussed in *The Hudson Review*)—in his characteristic clear-headed way Ellis directs his attention to the historical and philosophical dimensions of the problem, as befits the author of previous incisive books on literary theory and deconstruction. The more practical aspects of the matter can be seen almost daily in the social effects of the breakup of feminism into feminisms, the dispersion of "homosexual" into "gay" and "queer," the misbegotten attempts at speech codes, the blurring of the distinction between harassment and expressions of opinion. What Ellis is concerned to trace, however, are the consequences of political agendas on

[1] LITERATURE LOST: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities, by *John M. Ellis.* Yale University Press. $25.00.

[2] Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston, 1996), p. 171.

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the reading and teaching of literature, not so much from a "moral" perspective as from an analytical one involving gains and losses for human consciousness.

His account opens with a certain bemusement at the way in which the political left and right have changed their stances on the benefits of the humanities. For the past fifty years or so, the left defended the heterodoxies of the arts as voices of freedom amidst establishment conformities, whereas the right balked at the "godless," unpatriotic, community-destroying free-speaking of antinomian creativity. Now, however, the left regards the humanities as arms of the state in reinforcing acquiescence to majority interests in race, class, and gender conformities, whereas the right protests the tyranny and intolerance of a left-wing political correctness that disparages academic independence in favor of mass indoctrination.

In one of his sharpest chapters, Ellis traces the idealizations behind political correctness as far back as Tacitus' pie-in-the-sky crying-up of German culture and polity and then through Rousseau's noble savage, German romanticism's "Volk," Marx's proletariat, and Margaret Mead's Samoans. "We are surely familiar with this situation in our own time. A sophisticated man of letters, disillusioned and even embittered by the flaws, inconsistencies, and retrogressions of a great civilization, deludes himself that a world of primitive innocence and natural goodness exists in peoples who are untouched by the advances of that civilization." Today it is Native Americans and prehistoric goddess-worshipping cultures on whom the iconic role has been bestowed. But the historical record generated by these idealizations has not been very inspiriting, if the French and Russian revolutions can serve as examples. And the self-deluding doctrines behind political correctness, far from being new, are visible in Rousseau's view of literature and science as tools of rulers for repressing the lower classes. But Ellis reminds us that "Rousseau could not have been more wrong. Nothing proved more dangerous to the rulers of his time than the free expression of ideas by the creative writers and philosophers of the Enlightenment." And in the twentieth century we have seen the repressive effects of tight censorship in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during the period after World War II and how they spawned samizdat presses as liberating vehicles of literary subversion. One of the major themes of this book is that contrary to the repressive propaganda of today's race-gender-class establishment, "it is the developed countries that are slowly leading the world away from racism and male dominance. . . . In denouncing any deviation from their own value system as 'oppression,' race-gender-class scholars by implication denounce non-Western cultures and measure them rigidly by Western standards, the reverse of what they think they are doing."

Ellis' overarching complaint about political readings is that race-gender-class critics, even as they extol the merits of diversity, know in advance what all literary works are about. Instead of recognizing the genuine diversity of the provenance and execution of literary texts,

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these critics reduce the different to the same, ignoring the fact that a large percent of canonical writers were "loners and oddballs who irritated their ruling classes." In doing so, they also neglect the sensuous, imaginative, and playful aspects of the arts in general, often to the point of disparaging aesthetic response and betraying a lack of interest in the literary altogether, except as vehicles of propaganda. (Indeed, Gerald Graff has written about his dislike of literature at an early age, an aversion that was finally remedied by his awareness that literary works could be dealt with as political ideas.)

In defending the West as the chief source not only of freedoms that enlarge human possibility but as the source of the very ideas that produced race-gender-class critics in the first place, Ellis describes the unreal and distorted pictures of the past on which these critics' cases depend. And he asks, Why is patriarchy being challenged now rather than earlier? Were earlier women unconcerned about their crushing burdens or defective in the willpower needed to relieve them? His answer is worth pondering: the change in the status of women in contemporary society comes about "not because they have at last woken up to the enormity of the plot against them but because the conditions of human life have changed." In earlier times women were pregnant year after year because of the high rate of infant mortality and the need to produce enough children to work the land and perform the tasks required for sustenance when there was no such thing as Social Security. And because women died much earlier than they do now, their whole lives were literally taken up with breeding and nurturing. Without today's cars, telephones, and washing machines, etc., without the power derived from electricity, women were oppressed not so much by patriarchy as by the onerousness of simple daily survival. Electricity alone, Ellis reminds us, has leveled the playing field between the sexes, reducing the need for masculine strength to perform the tasks of day-to-day existence. The altered expectations of today's women have less to do with patriarchy than with technology. As for the injustices and inequalities that still prevail between the sexes, Ellis sees these as transitional phenomena that are rapidly being eliminated as the political power of women in Western-style democracies enables them to overcome masculine resistance to change. Ellis examines key writings of race-gender-class critics to show how victimology, obsession with patriarchy, and the invention of threadbare mythologies about matriarchy and indigenous peoples deflect women and minorities from more direct routes to reform. (Consider all the energy wasted in fruitless debates about whether women are the same as or different from men.) Like Camille Paglia, he sees Western capitalism, for all its sordid qualities, as the chief engine of change for the oppressed.

Ellis characterizes racism as a concept that did not exist before the very Enlightenment that is regularly bashed by postmodern critics. "When we denounce racism in absolute terms, we are measuring all cultures and all times by a standard that is distinctly modern and

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Western. In this respect, race-gender-class critics are not cultural relativists but cultural absolutists." And it was post-Enlightenment Europe that gradually moved toward the elimination of slavery throughout the world, a revolution not yet over but one that has had startling success in the course of little more than a century. It is where European influence has been weak that pockets of slavery still remain. And if more irony is required, objections to genocide, the ascendancy of anti-colonial sentiment, the concept of human rights, and "the very ideas of independence and self-determination" are fruits of the Enlightenment legacy. The real everyday practical problem is that during a transitional period when the world is gradually adopting more enlightened codes of behavior there will exist a double standard while the old and the new are fighting it out. These inconsistencies in public morality are not signs of the radical rottenness of our culture—as so many academics would have us believe—but of a culture in transformation. When we look to Asia and Africa what we see is dismal by comparison.

Like Alain Finkielkraut, Ellis is highly critical of Johann Gottfried Herder's celebration of ethnicity and tribalism (events of the past ten years in Eastern Europe and Africa are chilling exempla of the consequences) and its devaluation of shared humanity. He reminds us that racism in the United States seems to have gotten worse in recent years as more and more ethnicities become fractured into smaller and smaller interest groups. Campus life has become obsessively divisive as students are separated into ethnic and sexual minorities who refuse to live or even eat with each other. Incidents such as the notorious "water buffalo" case at the University of Pennsylvania reflect the paranoia and repressiveness of contemporary college life in which the focus on "difference" causes everyone to be perceived as a potential loose cannon waiting to be fired by real or imaginary slights. But my own view on this matter is that even real and intentional slights contribute to the toughening-up process that can turn one into an adult person capable of facing ordinary daily life, which is fraught with insults that can never be legislated away. When one set of obnoxious expressions becomes proscribed, new ones take their place. Ordinary human life involves crosses and putdowns that are part of the process of maturation. It's hard to believe that today's crybaby culture does anybody much good besides the legal profession, since hostilities remain however much you forbid or change the terms that name them. Behavior can be altered by much more effective means than repressing the expression of emotions that do not in fact go away through inexpression. Although race-gender-class scholars interpret "a common humanity" as "a cover for white hegemony," Ellis believes that "the way to make a multi-racial society work is neither by celebrating ethnicity nor by revisiting primitive innocence but through continued progress toward a civilized post-Enlightenment modernity."

In his chapter on class and egalitarianism, Ellis mounts a strong attack on academia's leading Marxist, Fredric Jameson, puzzled as to why

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Jameson should have reached a peak of academic popularity at the very moment when historical events revealed "that the central thrust and inspiration of his work was completely mistaken." Glorifying Mao and obsolete forms of communism, Jameson extols collective life and peasant villages while attacking his critics for their loss of faith in the optimistic sociopolitical doctrines of the sixties. Ellis zeroes in on his "dreamy words like 'authentic' and 'organic' " which "invoke a fantasized original harmony, but one can only wonder how long it would be before Jameson in his morally beautiful and authentic Third World village discovered its rampant (judged by his Western standards) sexism, authoritarianism, homophobia, tribalism, racism, to say nothing of its much lower life expectancy and vulnerability to disease and warfare." Jameson's examples of authenticity, Ellis remarks, turn out to be products of the Western culture he disparages: "black literature and blues, British working-class rock, women's literature, gay literature," etc. His animus against America seems astonishing in view of the great disparity in health and wealth between the U.S. and the Third World. Ellis is pretty brutal in sizing it all up: "This is an alienated, elitist intellectual with a vengeance: Can Jameson really hope that everyone will drop their commodities, read Adorno, and become appropriately miserable so that he will really have been right about them and their lives after all?"

Ellis decides that Jameson's "everything is political" stance fed into the growing academic delusion that oppression is the basic theme of all literary works, catapulting him into the role of chief guru of the academic avant-garde. But throughout *Literature Lost* Ellis regards politics as simply one of the many possible themes of the arts, a theme to which everything else cannot in fact be reduced. Unfortunately, many academics in the humanities have embraced the political in the form of agenda-driven teaching and research. The influence of Foucault, whose doctrine is that covert power relations are what really determine social and political life, has additionally contributed to the disbelief in truth among postmodern academics. If deconstruction's gimmick was to show that language is too slippery and multivocal to express anything clear-cut, Foucaultianism has reduced all utterances to veiled exercises of power, encouraging cynicism and opportunism (i.e., it's your myth or mine, you bastard). The all-or-nothing method of "PC logic" fails to recognize that though nothing may be absolutely true, there are multiple shades of validity and that the not-perfect is not necessarily total imperfection. Speaking of some of the currently trendy attacks on whites for their racism, Ellis observes that "when the degree of racism present among whites is compared not to an *absolute* absence of racism but to the degree of racism present in other racial groups [and other cultures and nations, one should add], it can be seen that these children of the Enlightenment are indeed a relatively enlightened group."

Ellis outlines several ways in which politically driven scholarship not only distorts and misrepresents its object of study but bullies its

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opponents so far as to try to deprive them of a forum for presenting their own point of view. Among other cases, he cites (as I have done in connection with the science wars) the notorious badmouthing of Richard Levin by twenty-four feminist critics in *PMLA* and their bad faith attempt to discredit his career. But even though these critics "deride the ivory-tower concept of the university, the truth is that they are uniquely the protected inhabitants of that ivory tower," distrusted by the general public and by many of their colleagues as well.

After exonerating theory as the source of today's culture wars, stressing that it is *bad* and faulty theory that is to blame rather than the theoretical impulse itself, Ellis concludes with a chapter entitled "How Did It All Happen—and What Comes Next?" which does not provide much cause for rejoicing. Who could have believed, he wonders, that English professors would come to tell their constituents that great literature is repressive and not worth reading? (But the problem extends beyond the literary to other humanities as well. In music, for instance, recent writings have attempted to cut Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and others down to size.) And since the notion of "genius" or exceptional minds is also in disfavor, Madonna and gay porn, he notes, seem as worthwhile objects of study as anything else.

To explain this, Ellis reports that in the sciences new avenues for research are constantly being opened, but in the humanities classic texts have to be interpreted over and over again. New theories are welcomed because they provide a basis for the new readings that are necessary to fuel careers. And whole new areas of investigation, like pop culture, are an especial bonanza. But Ellis' crucial distinction is that what appears to be politics in the new interpretations is really *literary* politics (i.e., a form of academic play) not real world politics. It is this literariness that makes it possible for academics to continue to apply Marxist criteria to literary works after the collapse of Marxism in the real world, even as they remain capitalist yuppies in their day-to-day lives.

And now we get to the really bad news: the race-gender-class themes that are only *literary* politics for senior professors have become *real* politics for the younger appointees who have been suckled on them in graduate school, "true believers in the race-gender-class issue who are not interested in literature and will not suddenly become literary scholars when the fashions change." Soon, as the older, faddish, faux political literati are superannuated and retired, whole literature departments will be entirely in the hands of the true believers—and indeed, I have seen this begin to happen. Moreover, Ellis sees this entire process intensified by affirmative action: "In literary studies, what began as a program for social justice in hiring has long since developed into hiring to service a teaching program that is *about* the themes of affirmative action." Add to this the bourgeois-baiting fashionable among bourgeois professors, their disbelief in the validity of knowledge, and their view that because Western civilization has faults and injustices it is at worst practically worthless and at best inferior to golden utopian societies that

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never existed—and you are left with a pretty dismal picture of the academic humanities scene at century's end. To wrap things up, Ellis offers a few suggestions, particularly the need for high quality public education as the most effective kind of affirmative action, but most readers will probably close this admirable book feeling dispirited. Yet it's worth mentioning that signs of change have been visible during the past few years: the repudiation of race-gender-class politics by an increasing number of leading academic humanists, a rethinking of affirmative action by federal and state governments, growing criticism of the Modern Language Association from within and without (Ellis is an officer in the rival Association of Literary Scholars and Critics), public discontent with higher education, and a shortage of academic jobs for humanities Ph.D.'s. Still, though no sensible person could seriously believe a return to an imagined golden past is possible or desirable or would deny that in many respects things are better and more just than they used to be, there's also no reason to play down the devastation being wrought or—as they ironically advised about rape in the sixties—just to lie back and enjoy it.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Actual Fiction

IT WAS AN EXTRAORDINARY SPRING FOR FICTION, as if all the established novelists, especially in this country, agreed to hand in their latest work by way of attesting to continuing vitality. Among others, Mailer, Bellow, Roth, and Pynchon—to name four senior citizens of the group—showed up at the fiction bazaar. (Only Updike decided to wait until fall.) Roth's *American Pastoral* seems to me major work, the premiere book of the year; Mailer has taken his lumps; and Pynchon, for reasons partly incomprehensible, spent a few weeks on the bestseller list. Whatever happened to all those symposia of dire predictions on the Future of the Novel? Vanished, along with worries about a Failure of Nerve, or Our Country and Our Culture. An occasional voice raises itself to deplore the "conservative" tenure of contemporary fiction, and for those in sympathy with the complaint they can turn again to the arty English cutup, Jeanette Winterson, whose sixth novel makes a fuss about how hard it is to tell a narrative ("That's how it was/is. The story falters, The firm surface gives way").[1] But most novelists at this century's end are getting on with the job, some of them in distinctly attractive ways. Here follow a few samples, in some cases commented on so briefly as scarcely to constitute a "review."

Why haven't I read John Banville before? His hefty novel about the career of a thinly-disguised Sir Anthony Blunt, was not to be put down as it proved, page by page, interesting, vivid, funny, full of the sardonic twists I take to have been characteristic of his subject.[2] The Blunt-figure is named Victor Maskell, and at the book's opening he has been unmasked as a Soviet informant, stripped of his knighthood, no longer Keeper of the Queen's Pictures, and dying of cancer to boot. Maskell agrees to be interviewed by a young woman writing a book, and the novel proceeds, in a conventional enough way, to move him through decades of this century with particular emphasis on the 1930s and 1940s. There is a rich surrounding cast of pals, homo (mostly) and hetero. Maskell is slow to discover his own queer identity, but when discovered he goes at it for all he's worth—that is when he's not betraying secrets or cataloguing the drawings of Poussin. (Anthony Blunt was a great scholar-critic of the painter.) The supporting cast includes people named Boy Bannister and Philip MacLeish (Burgess and Maclean of

[1] GUT SYMMETRIES, by *Jeanette Winterson*. Alfred A. Knopf. $22.00.
[2] THE UNTOUCHABLE, by *John Banville*. Alfred A. Knopf. $25.00.

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course) who eventually "escape" for good to Russia, and various figures whose real-life identities I missed. It's a novel replete with sensations—food, drink, smells, pungent speech—and, on the protagonist's part, an aesthete's nasty-clever perspective on things. Such as the 1950s, "the last great age of queerdom":

> All the talk is now of freedom and pride (pride!), but these young hotheads in their pink bell-bottoms, clamouring for the right to do it in the streets if they feel like it, do not seem to appreciate . . . the aphrodisiac properties of secrecy and fear. At night before I went out cottaging I would have to spend an hour downing jorums of gin to steady my nerves and steel myself for the perils that lay ahead. The possibility of being beaten up, robbed, infected with disease, was as nothing compared with the prospect of arrest and public disgrace . . . Yet what a sweet edge these terrors gave to my adventures in the night, what throat-thickening excitement they produced.

Never less than highly intelligent, and truly devoted to rendering an individual temperament, Banville's novel suggests to me he's as lively a writer (he is editor of the *Irish Times*, lives in Dublin) as anyone going. And the book makes you want to read Blunt and look at Poussin as well.

The other surprise in this quarter's books was an altogether assured and satisfying first novel by a writer one wants to hear more of.[3] Algonquin Books has had the great good sense to publish, in an admirably compact format, Suzanne Berne's book about a young girl's coming of age in the summer of 1972. The crime in the neighborhood is the murder of a young boy whom the ten-year-old protagonist, Marsha Eberhard, knew and didn't particularly like. Shock waves permeate the streets, men's surveillance patrols are organized, and suspicion—especially Marsha's—is focussed on a mysterious and disturbing bachelor, a Mr. Green, who has moved in next door. The murder coincides with a more intimate "crime" within Marsha's family, as her father is revealed to be having an affair with her mother's sister and he moves out of the house. The moment when her mother reveals she knows the truth is finely done as, in the midst of a pork chops and mashed potatoes supper

> My mother picked up her plate and, with a snap of her wrist, sailed it like a Frisbee straight across the dining room. China shattered. Mashed potatoes and gravy splattered against the wall and onto the blue carpet and sprayed my father's white shirt with grease spots. One half-eaten pork chop landed on top of the china closet.

[3] A CRIME IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD, by *Suzanne Berne*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. $17.95.

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The combination of violence and comic absurdity is typical of much of the book's tone. Behind the domestic and neighborhood upheavals is the Watergate burglary as it begins to dominate the media. Without being heavy-handed and portentous, Suzanne Berne manages to give a wonderful feel of what the early seventies felt like to a clever, maybe too-clever young girl.

This is a novel that while "adult" enough, is also one you feel might be read with interest and pleasure by an intelligent teenager (Frederick Buechner's fine *The Wizard's Tide* is such another). The heroine has a lineage at least as far back as the clever young girls in Flannery O'Connor's or Eudora Welty's stories, and more recently in Ann Beattie's *Falling in Place*. Since Marsha has sprained her ankle, she's on crutches and spends much *Rear Window*-like time in looking on and noting. Berne gives us perfectly the ordinariness of a small town street, lawns watering and cakes making; speech sounds are also excellent—a girl named Luann says to Marsha, "My mom says your daddy runned off . . . She says he's committed adult." The novel declares its subject to be "mistakes"—"where life really happens . . . when we get tricked into realizing something we never meant to realize." "Stories are about mistakes," reflects the adult narrative consciousness, looking back on that twenty-five-year-ago time.

Paul Theroux's fifteenth novel (not to mention the shelf of travel books and collected stories) is about the hand-over of Hong Kong to China—the "Chinese take-away" as it's called in the novel, whose publication date couldn't of course have been more timely.[4] Like his earlier *The Family Arsenal* and *Picture Palace*, it's an expert entertainment, in the Graham Greenish sense of that word—a suspenseful, darkish fiction (like Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*) whose characters don't invite or command our full sympathies the way, presumably, characters in a realistic novel do. Theroux's novel is about the gradual coming apart of Neville "Bunt" Mullard who, with a Chinese associate who dies at the outset of the book, has been running Imperial Stitching, a factory about to be taken-away by a sinister figure named Mr. Hung. Bunt is a bachelor, lives with his mother Betty, has a sex life consisting of effective and emotionless encounters with prostitutes or the occasional employee willing to render a service. The mother is jealous, spying, hatefully "English" in her ministrations to Bunt and eventually revealed to be comparably corrupt, as she and Mr. Hung collude to do Bunt out of the factory.

But plot or story isn't the main point, which, as always with Theroux, is the life of language. In *Kowloon Tong*, language is especially animated when it describes what and how people eat: "You're nid-nodding over your food," says Betty to Bunt at breakfast; "you look a little peaky," and she watches him closely as he eats "a soft-boiled egg, five rashers of

[4] KOWLOON TONG, by *Paul Theroux*. Houghton Mifflin Company. $23.00.

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streaky bacon, an oatie, half the papaya, two slices of toast to one of which she added jam, no soldiers." In a memorably disgusting scene when Bunt against his will (he doesn't like Chinese food) has dinner with Mr. Hung, the latter goes to work on some chicken parts; "Brandy was gleaming on Mr. Hung's lips. He looked drunk, his face pinkish and raw, his eyes boiled, and he was smiling in a vicious way as he chewed with his mouth open." No details are spared of this moveable feast:

> Hung's elbows were thrust out, his blue tongue showed as he stuck his chopsticks into the dish of yellow meat and used them like pliers to grasp a fragment of chicken breast. Its white flesh was exposed when he left a bite mark on it, then he chewed and gagged and pursed his lips. Again, with a retching noise, he spat garbage onto the table.

Theroux has a pretty good time, it looks to me, with this culinary awfulness, and there's a similarly clinical disgust displayed at most Hong Kong things generally. Not a book that touches the heart, but one by a writer who knows exactly how to construct a novel, tell a story.

Whenever on the down side, in need of a stronger tonic than Paul Theroux, I pick up Robert Stone's fiction and soon manage to feel better about things.[5] A flip remark, yes, but the assurance, in reading anything by this superbly gifted writer, that things are going to go, in one way or another, terribly wrong, is a mooring to hold onto. Four of the stories in this his first collection of short fiction, I was familiar with; the other three, including the title story, are new. He's not, as is Updike and was Flannery O'Connor, to the manner of the short flight born, and even the two best in this collection—"Absence of Mercy" and "Helping"—could have found their place in a longer narrative. "Absence of Mercy" in its details is the most autobiographical thing Stone has written, inasmuch as the early life of the protagonist—offspring of a disturbed, single-parent mother, time spent in an orphanage, teen escapades of drinking and fighting in New York City, service in the navy—corresponds to fact, more or less. "Absence of Mercy" is about a Hemingwayish encounter with fear in the self (Stone on the jacket now looks like Papa H.), a violent physical struggle in the 72nd Street IRT underground with a man who is the perfection of vile humanity. The hero, for all his righteous and even successful attempt to protect a woman from the ugly attentions of this man, ends by himself fleeing with fantasies of police in pursuit: "scattering pensioners and pigeons in Verdi Square, he kept on, faster and faster, increasing speed with every block," as he wonders "just how far he would run and where it was that he thought to go."

A number of the stories have as their central figures men and women strung out on pills and other heavy substances. As an old-fashioned guy

[5] BEAR AND HIS DAUGHTERS, by *Robert Stone.* Houghton Mifflin Company. $24.00.

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I felt closer to Elliott, in "Helping," who falls off the wagon, as gripping an account of such an event as I've read. Elliott has a job counseling veterans suffering from psychological disorders; like other Stone heroes, he has spent a time in Vietnam, is married to Grace (the right name), childless, an unnamed sorrow behind their marriage. She is an idealistic social worker whose spiritual intensities pain Elliot. He has been in A.A. for fifteen months, but after a depressing interview at the counseling center with a sufferer named Blankenship, who hasn't been in Vietnam but dreams of the place, Elliott finds himself on his way to the Midway Tavern and realizes that "he has contrived to promise himself a drink." The rather stilted diction is characteristic of much of Stone's slightly askew grammatical perceptions, as is the painful, gallows humor of the moment when he climbs on the barstool to be served by a bartender-club fighter from Pittsfield:

> Jackie G. greeted him as though he had been in the previous evening: "Say, babe?"
>
> "How do," Elliott said.
>
> A couple of the men at the bar eyed his shirt and tie. Confronted with the bartender, he felt impelled to explain his presence. "Just thought I'd stop by," he told Jackie G. "Just thought I'd have one. Saw the light. The snow . . ." He chuckled expansively.
>
> "Good move," the bartender said. "Scotch?"
>
> "Double," Elliott said.
>
> When he shoved two dollars forward along the bar, Jackie G. pushed one of the bills back to him. "Happy hour, babe."
>
> "Ah," Elliott said. He watched Jackie pour the double. "Not a moment too soon."

The expansive chuckle here, the bartender's "Good move," the final, perfectly grisly remark, can't be bettered. Elliott goes home, continues drinking, has a confrontation with his wife, fields a hostile phone call from a man intent on harassing her, sits up all night watching the snow fall, rifle cocked on his knee waiting for the caller to appear; eventually he takes an early morning walk in the freezing winter light, and meets his All-American neighbor, whom he loathes. The story ends in perfect irresolution, a memorable testimony to what this marvelous writer can do in a form that's not quite his own.

In Michael Gorra's shrewd *Times* book review of Richard Ford's collection of three stories, he notes that Ford's title reverse-echoes Hemingway's *Men Without Women*.[6] Gorra suggests that Ford may be thought of as a "post-macho" writer, preoccupied with the awkwardnesses, mistakes, and self-delusions of male erotic life. Two of these stories, "The Womanizer" and "Occidentals," are set in Paris, their

[6] WOMEN WITH MEN, by *Richard Ford*. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00.

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protagonists being similarly-tempered men, with a broken or failing marriage back home, who are attempting to realize a new affair. Part of what's disturbing about these stories is in their spirit of place: the American in Paris, maladroit with the language, uncertain of where exactly he is, always on the verge of getting lost while looking for that great restaurant. As with *Independence Day* of two years back, Ford is superb at inhabiting, in the most unmannered, directly intelligent way, sentences that move in perfect pitch and make the mere perusal of a paragraph a satisfying experience. The third-person narrator writes sympathetically about his heroes, refusing to set up their dreams of glory so he can take pleasure in demolishing them; instead he makes us complicit with the men, even as we sense they're on the way to trouble and deserve it. This is not so easy a feat as it may seem.

Ford's gift is to make a hair-raising moment of male humiliation seem inevitable, slightly comic, and regrettable. Martin Austin, the man in the opening story, returns to Oak Grove, Illinois, after his significant encounter with a French woman whom he hasn't slept with but wants to see more of. Over drinks in a restaurant, his wife Barbara accuses him of taking her, and himself, for granted; whereupon Martin replies that he's sorry but he can't do anything about it. Barbara's response is blunt: "Then you're just an asshole . . . And you're also a womanizer and you're a creep. And I don't want to be married to any of those things anymore." Emptying her glass of gin, she exits with "So . . . fuck you, and goodbye." She has a point, but by this time we've invested a lot in following Martin's not at all blunt, scrupulously rendered consciousness, so we don't stand up and cheer, nor walk out with Barbara. A moment like this one helps make clear Ford's acknowledging, in an introductory note, his debt of gratitude to the stories and novels of Richard Yates, "a writer too little appreciated." Yates was of course a masterly imaginer of male embarrassments and disasters; Ford's realistic style is as pure as Yates's, perhaps a little more nuanced and full. More exploratory too: "The Womanizer" ends with Martin asking himself questions like, "How could you regulate life, do little harm and still be attached to others?" Could one become "detached, unreachable"? "Was it something you controlled, or a matter of your character, or a change in which you were only a victim?" No answers forthcoming, but the questions are important. In his review, Gorra called Ford an American classic and the claim is beginning to sound plausible.

Extremely short takes:[7] I never got the point about Cynthia Ozick as an interesting novelist, and nothing in her new collection of related tales enlightened me. The heroine works for the civil service and has to deal with people like "Leon Cracow, a bachelor from Forest Hills who wore

[7] THE PUTTERMESSER PAPERS, by *Cynthia Ozick*. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00. THE BLUE FLOWER, by *Penelope Fitzgerald*. Houghton Mifflin Company. $12.00p. REALITY AND DREAMS, by *Muriel Spark*. Houghton Mifflin Company. $22.00. ALIAS GRACE, by *Margaret Atwood*. Doubleday. $24.95.

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bow ties and saddle shoes" and who is "engaged in a tedious litigation: he had once read a novel and fancied himself its hero. The protagonist wore bow ties and saddle shoes. Cracow was suing for defamation." If you like these sorts of jokes they're much better told by the late Stanley Elkin. Penelope Fitzgerald's clever historical reconstruction of the early career of the German romantic poet Novalis has been treated as if it were a masterpiece, but maybe you have to be a pushover for things German (as Michael Hofmann was in his *Times* review) to inflate a jeu d'esprit to such heights. Dame Muriel Spark, approaching eighty, has produced her own jeu d'esprit that runs easily through the mind and out the other side. Light and bright and sparkling, as delightful as it is forgettable. At the other extreme, consider Margaret Atwood, who has gone to immense pains in constructing an elaborate historical novel about a nineteenth-century Canadian woman accused of murder, judged insane, now (in 1859) being examined by a young doctor who is studying mental illness. Plenty of contemporary newsclips and other accounts surround the action as well as apt quotations from Victorian poets—Tennyson, Browning, Rossetti. It's very professionally done, though prolonged, but exactly to what end? A good read, I guess.

Which claim I can't make for Pynchon, since I had a terrible time with *Mason & Dixon*, you might even say Drew the Line at it, found myself often Bored Silly, kept Losing out on Conversations, must have Missed many Jokes.[8] If you think it's a great idea to rewrite the eighteenth-century English novel, as if it weren't the glory of English fiction to have moved out of it into the nineteenth-century novel; if you love Capitalizations and Antick spellings and arcane Lore, then this is the book you've been waiting for. I was amused by the Monte Python Pynchon, he of the Talking Dog, the Mechanical Duck and the Great four-ton Gloucester Cheese, of villages named Thornton-le-Beans and nobility named Lord Oafery, he who presides at the baking of the first English Pizza and conjures up a cook named, who else, Shorty. But beyond that? All that astronomy, that surveying, do you want to read about how "The Arc fails to meet the Forty-Degree North Parallel. The Tangent fails to be part of any Meridian. The West Line fails to begin from the Tangent Point, being five miles north of it"? And then the poems, so amusing as I remember them in *V*, here on replay just awful. Has my taste matured? Rotted? Wasn't the theater ("It's all theater") of *Gravity's Rainbow* so much more dazzling? As noted earlier, *Mason & Dixon* graced the bestseller lists for some weeks. Did you purchase it, reader, and how did you get on with it? Perhaps, like John Leonard in *The Nation*, your enthusiasm knew no bounds, and you have ended up calling it "one of the great novels about male friendship in anybody's literature." Or perhaps not, in which case drop me a line, and we'll share.

Thomas Pynchon and Saul Bellow: the long and short of it. I read

[8] MASON & DIXON, by *Thomas Pynchon*. Henry Holt and Company, Inc. $27.50.

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Bellow's novella twice and ended up unsure just what sort of experience I'd had.[9] Its first-person narrator, Harry Trellman, invites us to see his story as an emergence, after decades of concealment and avoidances, into engaging with the "actual," as he declares himself to the love of his life all along, Amy Wustrin. Yet the manner in which Harry tells his story is typically glancing and undemonstrative, almost as if he's swallowing his sentences. In the margin next to one paragraph, describing some of Amy's past history, I wrote the word "style":

> Berner, whom she married when she got her B.A., inherited a small raincoat factory. He gambled it away. He took a bank loan on the house in Oak Park and soon Amy and her girls were homeless. Berner disappeared for a good while. She obtained a divorce. The children were still quite young when she married Jay Wustrin.

This sounds like anti- or non-style, unelegantly declarative as by design; yet elsewhere Bellow has lost none of the delicacy of observation characteristic of him—the ability in a few phrases to sum up the economic and moral status of someone, like a toy manufacturer named (perfectly) Bodo Heisinger:

> In the old days he had manufactured squirt guns, peashooters, wind-up she-monkeys who combed their monkey hair while jiggling a hand mirror—nowadays, of course, children wanted hideous outer space aliens, monstrously muscled and distorted. He had anticipated that and his company was doing extremely well.

Although compared to Sigmund Adletsky, a nonagenerian who with his wife, "Dame Siggy," is buying Heisinger's apartment (while resisting the purchase, for high sums, of the apartment's contents), Bodo is in a lower league: "The sums named were as trivial to the Adletskys as change slipping from your pants pocket between the sofa cushions and down into the upholstery."

Bellow's protagonists are always looking at their faces and telling us about them: Wilhelm at the opening of *Seize the Day* sees his reflection in the glass cupboard at the newsstand of the Hotel Gloriana and decides, while allowing "for the darkness and deformations of the glass," that "he thought he didn't look too good" (details follow). Herzog, on page two, catches "the shadow of his face in a gray, webby window. He looked weirdly tranquil." Harry Trellman has had years of practice at noting his "Chinese" aspect: "a pair of fat black eyes, a wide mouth with a sizable lip. Wonderful materials for the insidious Fu Manchu look." Bellow has invested much of himself in these men, whether on the down-and-out path like Wilhelm, or moving toward an embrace of life, like Herzog and

[9] THE ACTUAL, by *Saul Bellow.* Viking. $17.95.

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Harry, and I think there is a strong autobiographical note in *The Actual.* Harry is proud of his special gift of composure—"Not to look impressed"; at one point near the end Amy urges him to speak up: "Most of your communication has got to be inward, so that even when you're with somebody else you more than half talk to yourself." Harry is supposed to have made his pile in business, but I suspect he is really a novelist, a spy, like Bellow, devoted to delivering the goods on all these worldly, aggressive, hard-nosed and now aged Jews. When on the final page of the book Harry tells us, "I turned back from myself and looked into Amy's face," we are invited to take it as a move out of self-absorption into the actual. Still, on the back cover flap, in color, is a lovely picture of Bellow sitting out in the backyard, in relaxed clothes, legs crossed, arms folded, a nice smile on his face topped by a good-looking fedora. I thought of Tommy Wilhelm's belief that "when a man is smoking a cigar wearing a hat, he has an advantage; it is harder to find out how he feels." Saul Bellow, even without the cigar, hasn't lost his caginess.

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TESS LEWIS

Bolton's World

IN *THREE REFORMERS*, HIS 1925 STUDY OF LUTHER, Descartes, and Rousseau, Jacques Maritain apportioned no small share of responsibility to these thinkers for contributing to modern man's "deformities," his excesses and weaknesses. The title fairly drips with irony as Maritain blames their philosophical hubris for helping bring about a social order in which

> the modern city sacrifices the *person* to the *individual*; it gives universal suffrage, equal rights, liberty of opinion, to the *individual*, and delivers the *person*, isolated, naked, with no social framework to support and protect it, to all the devouring powers which threaten the soul's life, to the pitiless actions and reactions of conflicting interests and appetites . . . And it says to each of the poor children of men set in the midst of this turmoil: "You are a free individual; defend yourself, save yourself, all by yourself." It is a homicidal civilization.

Although Isabel Bolton's vision is far less apocalyptic, the individual, defenseless and alone in the wilds of civilization, is exactly her terrain. Born Mary Britton Miller in 1883, Isabel Bolton lived through the most destructive decades of our century and died in 1975, at the age of ninety-two. She did not publish her first adult novel until 1946, and so was able to observe Freud's influence, for better and worse, on the soul's life and our understanding of the "devouring powers" that threaten it from within. Bolton set more store in the potentially redemptive powers of culture, beauty, and art and the shaky remnants of a social framework than Maritain did. In fact, Marcel Proust surfaces repeatedly in her work as a sort of Virgil in the modern underworld who can equip his initiates with "all manner of extensions, reinforcements, renewals of [the] entire nervous system—indeed . . . a perfectly new apparatus for apprehending the vibrations of other people's souls." We can even learn much, one of her characters maintains, from Proust's minute dissection of a civilization in its death-throes.

Despite new internal resources, however, Bolton's characters are still at the mercy of the modern city. New York City is more than a stage upon which the action of the three novels collected in *New York Mosaic* unfolds.[1] Its architecture both influences and reflects the changing

[1] NEW YORK MOSAIC: Three Novels, by *Isabel Bolton*. Intro. by *Doris Grumbach*. Steerforth Press. $35.00.

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social order, from the "stolid brownstone houses" and the "newer, more pretentious mansions with the plate-glass doors, the grill-work and the European flourishes" that bristle "with the importance of family ownership," the dynastic, and the permanent to the skyscrapers, at once threatening and exhilarating, grandiose symbols of isolation and individuality. New York City plays as active a role in Bolton's novels as it does in the later novels of her contemporary, Dawn Powell, although New York and its inhabitants are not as predatory in Bolton's work as in the latter's. Bolton's wit is more muted than Powell's, but her range is wider. Her portrayals of the cocktail party circuit, of the alcoholic haze in late night bars, of ambitious, egotistical artists are as clear-eyed and satirical as Powell's but Bolton does not indulge in the same pervasive, hard-bitten cynicism. Her characters' emotional scales are more subtly differentiated.

Bolton's novels, like her oeuvre, are slender. She wrote five books of children's poetry and one children's novel before publishing *Do I Wake or Sleep*, her first work of adult fiction, under her pen name at the age of sixty-three. Two novels followed at three-year intervals, *A Christmas Tree* (1949) and *Many Mansions* (1952). *Under Gemini*, a memoir of her adolescence and its abrupt end with her twin sister's accidental death, appeared in 1966. Her last novel, *The Whirligig of Time* (1967), is a Whartonesque reminiscence of lost love. All of these books are less than 200 pages long. Yet their brevity should not belie her accomplishments. Bolton writes with a concentration of detail and an intricate narrative structure that linger long after her books are read.

She learned her masters' lessons well. Their various influences are clear: Henry James's psychological characterizations and his use of consciousness as a narrative prism; Virginia Woolf's lyric subjectivity; and the musical structure of Proust's sentences and narratives, as well as the dramatic interplay of present and past in his novels. It would be easy, but unfair, to dismiss Bolton as a gifted, but insufficiently innovative latecomer to literary movements that had run their course. Indeed all of her novels have the patina of nostalgia for an admittedly not so golden era. She wrote novels of manners when the manners she had known had already disintegrated. Her characters, adrift in an uncertain world, know better than to glorify the past, but cannot help longing for the lost security of their often unhappy childhoods. It is in the contrast between her novels' well-defined forms and the confusion they portray that the appeal of her fiction lies.

A year before Maritain voiced his lament for a more structured society, Virginia Woolf assessed our collective soul somewhat more casually in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," a lecture on the evolution of the English novel from the Edwardians (Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy) to the Georgians (Forster, Lawrence, Joyce, and Eliot):

> . . . [O]n or about December 1910 human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden and there

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> saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910 . . . All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.

1910 can also serve as the date of a seismic shift in human character within Isabel Bolton's novels. Her most complex characters are born before 1910 and find themselves caught between generations, trying to understand the changes around them, but still too shaped by their origins to immerse themselves completely in their surroundings. They are, as a rule, observers; observers who are occasionally capable of action, but primarily passive.

Millicent Munroe, the protagonist of *Do I Wake or Sleep*, is a journalist and scriptwriter in early middle age. She is still single despite her better judgment, having refused many years earlier a proposal from an aspiring English novelist for reasons she could never quite explain. Millicent is bewildered by her instinctive contrariness and a world in which "personal relationships seemed to have lost their edge and outline. One grasped at nothing tangible. There was hunger, there was immense curiosity. There was an urgency." Despite the urgency, she is more acted upon than active. And now she is determined to devote her life to saving the established, but severely alcoholic novelist Percy Jones. Percy is newly captivated by the beautiful European refugee Bridget St. Dennis, whose story gradually unfolds during the course of the novel's twenty-four hours. She has left a young daughter in Vienna. In fact, Bridget abandoned her to relatives when still an infant without much concern until she was endangered by the Nazis. Bridget's final revelation clinches Percy's resolve to devote himself to the child's rescue. He is, after all, as eager to sacrifice himself to a cause as Millicent. Bridget's daughter, handicapped and deformed, is being paraded around with a sign on her neck—*Kleine Jüdin.*

Dinner in the French Pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair, drinks at the Algonquin, lunch at a toney French restaurant, a visit to the dressmakers, and a cocktail party thrown by a fashionable hostess serve not only as a backdrop to Bridget's tale, contrasting the frivolous social scene with intense personal dramas, but also as an opportunity for contrasting American and European manners and mores. The Americans' optimism, ambition, and youthful vigor are evident in the Futurama exhibit at the World's Fair and in New York City's extravagant architecture. American moralism is embodied in its literature and in its novelists' endless attempts "to reshape, to remould the [human] creature according to some pattern they desperately yearned to have it conform to," of which Percy Jones is a minor, but fitting example. Europeans, "old and

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wise and without illusions," on the other hand, with their deeper, more accepting and sophisticated understanding of human nature, had been

> documenting the human heart for centuries—they'd crystallized its gestures. Why, European literature was like a great cathedral, its beast and angel symbols—the earthly, the heavenly elements—all displayed . . . Behold the human family—the human heart, its innocence and corruption, its vices, its virtues, its needs, desires, passions, and, furthermore, behold—its subterranean depths—the thoughts that lie here unacknowledged; the duplicities, the villainies, the hidden, the sensuous imagery—and above all and always to be considered, its need to be forgiven.

Nonetheless, despite its cultural reserves, its deeper wisdom, the European continent is on the verge of disintegrating into ruins and barbarity.

Bridget dispassionately pursues her well-calculated strategy to save her daughter, a strategy that does not include Percy among its puppets. Millicent and Percy come to realize that devoting themselves to noble but hopeless causes is not likely to assuage the hungers slowly gnawing away at their hearts. What alternatives, if any, there might be is not clear.

In *Do I Wake or Sleep* as in her other novels, Isabel Bolton maintains, for the most part, a fine balance between American earnestness and European world-weary fatalism. When she errs, it is on the side of wide-eyed earnestness. A few of her characters preserve throughout their lives a childlike capacity for reverence and wonder. Often overwritten, their experiences of awe and inspiration seem cloying, surrounded as they are with Bolton's clear-eyed presentation of her characters, their warts and charms, and the dry intelligence of her prose.

The most egregious of these lapses occurs in *The Christmas Tree.* The fits of rapture that overwhelm a young interior decorator when he beholds a perfect place setting, an artistically arranged fruit bowl, or especially the eponymous Christmas tree are not meant as parody or as the young man's affectation. His "raising the hand to the back of the head, lifting the shoulders, this sudden letting forth of gasps and long-drawn sighs, this attempt to express the inexpressible," are meant to convey a prodigious need for beauty, culture, and art that arises from the meagreness of his existence. Instead, particularly in the midst of this tragic tale, the effect is one of silliness.

The decorator, Jerry Styles, is one of a series of young men that the charismatic Larry Danforth has taken up and discarded. Although Larry is the pivot around which the plot revolves, the story's events are seen mainly through his mother's eyes and the prism of her past. Hildegard Danforth's memories of her own and Larry's childhoods crowd in upon her as she anxiously awaits him. From an early age, she had recognized, with a child's unsparing intuition, that in her parents' straight-laced world, "parental love was meted out on the oddest possible terms and that the only conspicuous evidence of their affection for her lay in

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[their] habitual declaration that she was all they had on earth." The adults' interaction was no less bewildering. Hilly's father, madly in love with her beautiful mother, had to content himself with a few furtive kisses from which his wife would recoil, admonishing him, "Pull yourself together Leonard; not *that*, not *now*." Hilly's insight brought her little courage, and, "docile and obedient to the point of self-extinction," she calmly acquiesced to a loveless marriage arranged by her parents and a family friend eager to find a suitable match for her unimaginative grandson. Shortly after her wedding, Hilly's father commits suicide, having lost most of his own and the family friend's fortune in the Great Crash. Hilly's husband is killed in an accident while rushing to his grandmother's side after hearing of her financial losses. Pregnant and newly liberated with enough money to live comfortably, Hilly escapes the stifling world of the wealthy American bourgeoisie and exiles herself to Europe. She has vowed to give her son the freedom, culture, and daily experience of beauty that she never had. She also lavishes upon him all the love that had been missing from her life. It is a legacy her son will hold against her.

Bolton intersperses Hilly's reminiscences with Larry's own perspective and that of his ex-wife Anne. Although the variations are in emphasis rather than substance, they do provide depth to the characters. Hilly had been silently aware of Larry's homosexuality since his adolescence, but still persuaded him to marry Anne. When Anne, fed up with Larry's affairs, finally demands a divorce, Hilly testifies against him, for the sake of her grandson.

Various causes of Larry's homosexuality are suggested throughout the novel albeit with reservations and a certain amount of self-consciousness. Was it a mother-complex that arose from the intense, exclusive relationship he and Hilly had formed during his childhood? Or is it that Hilly had cultivated in him "the most nervous and acute, the most overdeveloped aesthetic tastes" by dragging him through Europe, immersing him in its culture and artistic treasures and overwhelming him with her ecstatic responses to it? Or was it his response to a loss of identity in the vacuum that followed the unmasking of Victorian moralities, the Victorian God, and other certainties that had once seemed so immutable? Whatever the cause and despite the unpleasantness of Larry's personality, Bolton's treatment of homosexuality is a sympathetic one. Her conclusion seems to be that it is an understandable response to the social disorder of our time.

Now Larry has cast off yet another of his "young men" and is headed to his mother's home in New York City with an equal desire for forgiveness and revenge. It is Christmas Eve, 1945, and everyone is converging upon Mrs. Danforth's apartment where she has been keeping Larry's six-year-old son, Henry, while Anne has gone to Reno to marry the war hero Captain Fletcher. Larry knows of the marriage and is peevishly drawn to the scene. In addition, the entire country's mood is frenetic. The end of World War II and the constant stream of

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returning soldiers have unleashed a sense of exuberance that is not without its undercurrent of barely contained horror: relief punctuated by reminders of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Dresden. Thus a volatile stage is set for the encounter between Larry and Captain Fletcher and the novel's climax falls just shy of melodrama. Had Bolton not provided her characters with sufficient complexity and ambivalence—again, quite amazingly, in less than 200 pages—the tragic denouement would have seemed merely manipulative.

The horrors of war, especially World War II, and military technology run amok also provide a background chorus to Bolton's third novel, *Many Mansions.* The day's headlines, "Truman Orders Hydrogen Bomb Built," repeatedly intrude on the characters' meditations and are reflected in the cityscape.

> The air heavy with clouds and smoke and rain hung like a shroud over the city. In the tall office buildings clustered at the foot of Madison Avenue the lights shining in the assembled windows gave the effect of countless diminished suns and moons peering dead and rayless into the gloom and diffused an ominous light like the amber glow that fills the atmosphere before a summer storm.

Yet, unlike *The Christmas Tree, Many Mansions* will end not with a bang, but with a whimper—a poignant whimper, but a whimper nonetheless.

Many Mansions is the most finely crafted of these three novels. It is even more condensed than the previous two: a mere 132 pages. A synopsis of the plot would not do justice to its complexity. Along with the precision and clarity of her prose, Isabel Bolton's greatest strength is her ability to guide the reader through a tangle of motivations and conflicting emotions with a few well-chosen signposts. Almost all of the action in *Many Mansions* occurs in the past and behind the scenes. It is reflected through the elderly heroine's limited but growing awareness of the forces that have buffeted her for eight and a half decades. The anticlimactic ending fittingly counterpoints the novel's emotional tension and eerily foreshadows Isabel Bolton's own death at ninety-two of a stroke alone in her New York apartment.

Margaret Sylvester, eighty-four years old on February 1, 1950, the day of the novel's beginning and end, is rereading for the first time a memoir she had written years earlier. She has experienced firsthand the social changes Virginia Woolf posited in 1910. Margaret grew up under the shadow of a domineering grandmother whose moral self-righteousness, bolstered by an implicit belief that God extended His personal benevolence towards her as towards all the wealthy and well-born, did not proscribe her husband's dalliances as long as he conducted them in her sight and under her control. Completely shielded by her family's hypocrisy, the young Margaret understood sexual relations as a matter of the licensed exhibition of charms and necklines or displays of jealousy that smacked of absurdity rather than

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passion. Not a word is said when her Aunt Eleanor's husband Lucien Grey gets her pregnant. She is simply shipped off to Italy to bear the child in a convent. Without her assent or knowledge, the child is adopted by friends of her grandmother. The manuscript ends there, but Margaret continues to reflect upon the ensuing years in which her actions were determined as much by her reaction to the oppressive strictures of her past as by her bewilderment in a world without these strictures, a world in which the self as she had known it—a cog in an intricate social machine—was shattered.

In search of solace and reassurance, she joined humanitarian causes, immersed herself in the City's cultural life, cultivated friendships with young men, but, the passion having been burnt out of her, she retreats into herself. There are several other stories woven into Margaret's which cannot adequately be described with any brevity. Yet one of the novel's crowning moments comes when she realizes that the young man renting her basement flat who is threatening to walk out on his pregnant girlfriend is her own son. The experience is far more devastating than the years of regret she has suffered.

Another brief encounter that causes numerous puzzle pieces to fall suddenly into place occurs twenty years after her child's birth. Aunt Eleanor and Lucien invite her to tea at the Plaza. Superficial and effusive, much stouter but still beautiful, Eleanor drags the once relatively independent-minded Lucien in tow. At one point Lucien enthusiastically recommends Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann*. Margaret has not yet read it, and so cannot appreciate Lucien's message. This is the volume in which Charles Swann exclaims, having sacrificed his social position and much of his fortune to pursuing and marrying the *cocotte* Odette de Crécy, "To think that I wasted years of my life, that I wanted to die, that I had my greatest love for a woman I didn't like, who was not even my type!" Determinedly ignorant, Aunt Eleanor does not understand either, but she does not need to. Only the usual superficialities are uttered, but it suddenly becomes clear to Margaret that Lucien knows nothing of the child and that Eleanor, fully aware of the situation, had forced Lucien to her side and orchestrated Margaret's two-year exile in Italy and her child's adoption.

Lucien's discreetly nostalgic tone changes abruptly when Margaret explains that she has spent the last two decades as a union organizer. Lucien acts as if he is the one who had been dealt the mortal blow. After all, betraying your wife is one thing, but betraying your class is entirely another.

Those characters in Bolton's work that have any level of self-consciousness or an awareness that transcends the narrow bounds of class are plagued with a vague but pervasive sense of guilt—guilt for their own sins as well as for the general hopelessness that grips their world. Whether their reaction is to devote themselves to others or to collecting cultural fragments they can shore against their ruin, they are

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persistent in their hope that somehow, even if they cannot improve the world much, they can at least find their place in it.

Isabel Bolton's writing reveals a discreet but discerning intelligence. Her awareness of the limitations of European culture did not prevent her from discerning its value. She was thoroughly familiar with European and American art and literature and mined it for what truths or spiritual consolation it could provide. It is difficult to imagine what she would have made of today's militant philistines who cannot see beyond the various causes and identities they have embraced. For Isabel Bolton this cultural tradition was not something to be divided and conquered, but a means of reconciling the inner, spiritual self with the social and political self. Or, in Maritain's terms, a means of honoring both the *person* and the *individual.*

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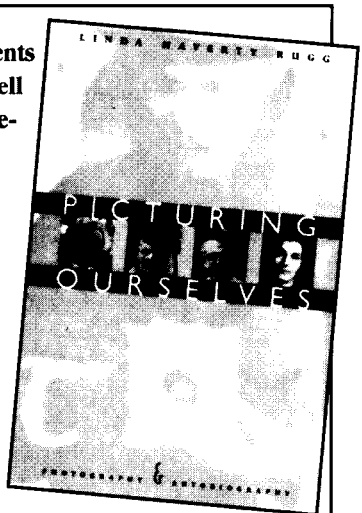

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JAMES W. TUTTLETON

Making a Few Good Friends

I CAME TO THE PERSONAL ESSAY, AT ABOUT AGE EIGHT OR NINE, by way of the humorous anecdotes and jokes in the *Reader's Digest*. That magazine, together with a half-dozen religious journals, constituted the only periodical reading in my parents' household. After reading the jokes for a few months, I then moved up to the essays. I especially enjoyed those that dealt with a miraculous delivery from an incurable illness or that described "the most unforgettable character I have ever met." At some later point I came across the essays of Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, and even later I began to study, as a feature of a college English major, the nineteenth-century "familiar essay" as a literary form. The term "familiar essay," however, is no longer very useful to a mass audience today. If, to Lamb or Hazlitt, it meant merely "personal," or "autobiographical," rather than expository or descriptive, now the term suggests an essay already known to us, one that we have already read. Some publishers, I suppose, would want to call these "personal" essays.

My thoughts about the familiar essay are, in any case, occasioned by the publication of *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, a splendid new anthology of familiar essays selected by Joseph Epstein.[1] It collects, from amongst the many thousands of brief personal accounts in English, fifty-three of the best such essays published in the past century. Represented here are writings of Winston Churchill, Max Beerbohm, Bertrand Russell, Doris Lessing, Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, Mark Twain, H. L. Mencken, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ralph Ellison, Truman Capote, Willa Cather, Eudora Welty, Joan Didion, Amy Tan, James Baldwin, E. B. White, Loren Eiseley, John Gregory Dunne, Richard Rodriguez, Shelby Steele, Flannery O'Connor, Dorothy Parker, Katherine Anne Porter, V. S. Naipaul, and a great many others.

One of these others, by the way, is Mr. Epstein himself, who can hold his own with any other master of the form. His essay "I Like a Gershwin Tune" is a lively and well-written account of the impact on him, in his youth, of popular music and musicians like the Gershwins, Louis Armstrong, Frankie Laine, and The Four Aces, the last of whom, we are gratified to learn, "gave the English language the phrase 'sh-boom, sh-boom.' " Other essays on a musical note include Ralph Ellison's "Living with Music" and Jeremy Bernstein's "Take the 'A' Train." I was

[1] THE NORTON BOOK OF PERSONAL ESSAYS, ed. by *Joseph Epstein*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. $30.00.

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especially struck with Ellison's easy transitions between jazz and classical music. For him, Mozart and Ellington, Kirsten Flagstad and Chippie Hill were all alike in their exaltation of rhythm and melody. His celebration of the art, however, turns into something else on a deeper level of understanding:

> Perhaps in the swift change of American society in which the meanings of one's origin are so quickly lost, one of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time. In doing so, it gives significance to all those indefinable aspects of experience which nevertheless help to make us what we are. In the swift whirl of time music is a constant, reminding us of what we were and of that toward which we aspired. Art thou troubled? Music will not only calm, it will ennoble thee.

I, for one, have felt so ennobled, not merely by music but by the insight and understanding of life that suffuse these brilliant little gems that Mr. Epstein has selected. Surely he is the right person to have edited *The Norton Book of Personal Essays.* For one thing, he has been for a very long time (from the mid-1970s almost to the present) the editor of *The American Scholar.* This distinguished publication, a journal of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, offered under his editorship some of the best intellectual and scholarly work available in magazine form. But whatever the merits of his erudite and weighty contributors (Nobel laureates, Pulitzer Prizewinners, the academic *crème de la crème*), a great many of us went there for the familiar essays that Epstein himself published, each quarter, under the pen name of "Aristides." His personal essays—some of them collected in *The End of My Tether: Familiar Essays* (1983), *A Line Out for a Walk: Familiar Essays* (1994), and *With My Trousers Rolled: Familiar Essays* (1997)—are models of stylistic elegance and prove the value and charm of wearing lightly a formidable learning.

Mr. Epstein's "take" on the familiar essay is worth considering as a preliminary since it rationalizes his own practice as a writer and governs his selection of essays. His assignment from Norton was evidently "to select good essays, all originally written in English and published in this century." Noting that Michel de Montaigne (1530-1590), in his *Essais,* was the first great practitioner of the form, Epstein leaps rapidly over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, scanting even Hazlitt, Lamb, and Emerson in the nineteenth century, and comes right up to the present. But his introductory piece, "The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery," suggests to me, in its leap up to the present, that he finds little evolution in the form. In this, I believe, he is substantially right. What might be added, though, is that the personal essay really emerges as a popular genre with the rise of nineteenth-century Romanticism, with its fixation on "genius," the writer's personality, and literature as an index of sensibility. We see these preoccupations in the rise of Romantic lyric poetry and the novel of character, but it is of course the personal essay

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that most conspicuously assumes them. (I regard Romanticism as still, substantially, the governing literary ideology today—hence the continuing popularity of the form.)

As his introduction suggests, the personal essay is for Mr. Epstein "the freest form in all of literature." It is "grounded by reality" (and so is not fiction) but has as its material the "sweetest of subjects—my own experience." This experience, as the anthology itself shows, can be about large subjects and small, the past and the present, the exotic and the domestic. But whatever a writer's ostensible topic, in Mr. Epstein's view "the true subject is the author of the essay." It is preeminently, then, "a form of discovery" in which a writer launches himself into the unknown without really knowing where he will wind up. Following Hazlitt, he observes that

> to write in a truly familiar style "is to write as any one would speak in common conversation, who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes." A familiar style, in other words, is a natural style—natural to conversation, very superior conversation to be sure, and without artifice, pomposity, any bull whatsoever. To be natural in prose, it turns out, much practice is required. The first thing one must learn—and here the exercise of the personal essay is a help—before one can be oneself is who oneself really is.

The personal essayist's inquiry is based on the grand (even egotistical) assumption that there is some meaning in his experience, that it will interest others, that it may even have a universal application. Its provisional, tentative, skeptical, and exploratory character makes it "the ideal form for ages of transition and uncertain values. Such an age, for better *and* for worse," Mr. Epstein believes, "is the one in which we now live." Finally, he holds that, if "the personal essayist writes . . . for himself," he thinks of his readers, "even though he has never met them," as "potentially his friends." Thus "an amiable community is built up between essayist and audience" that is much like good conversation and intimate friendship.

How about the subjects dealt with in this collection? Naturally, reading, writing, and language itself are recurrent themes. Mark Twain is as hilarious, in "Italian Without a Master," as he is elsewhere on the too-often sesquipedalian German tongue. Leslie Stephen's principles of style are splendidly illustrated by his daughter, Virginia Woolf. Edmund Wilson's "A Preface to Persius" celebrates the art of translation. In "Notes on Punctuation," Lewis Thomas perfectly illustrates what colons, semicolons, and commas are meant for. Joan Didion ruminates on her own notebooks, and Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue" is a charming evocation of the expressive "broken English" of her Chinese mother.

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Aside from the substance, these essays have the merit of embodying, often by means of indirection, the implied poetics of the writer.

Some of my favorite essays here are portraits of people. Willa Cather, who (I am inclined to think) is not very deep, is represented by a splendid word picture of Madame Franklin Grout, an elderly woman at a resort who turns out to have been Gustave Flaubert's niece, the child "Caro" of the *Lettres à sa Nièce Caroline.* The verbal portrait of this upright old lady widens into a deeply felt admiration for the spare economy of Flaubert's art (as opposed to Balzac's padded verbiage) and a celebration of the *novel démeublé* (as opposed to the elaborate interior decoration of the novel of manners).

Doris Lessing and Virginia Woolf, as befitting avowed feminists, write very complicatedly about their fathers. Cynthia Ozick is less than admirable, in "The Lesson of the Master": she commits literary parricide in denouncing Henry James for the ruination of her fiction. (In James's short story of that name, a superior fiction writer advises young Paul Overt, the would-be writer, that one cannot have both an artist's career and a domestic life of husband- and fatherhood—although the Master has both.) It seems that young Miss Ozick fell for this idea of the high priesthood of art and chose Art over Life—only to discover in midcareer the emptiness of the aesthete choice: "It seemed to me James had left out the one important thing I ought to have known, even though he was saying it again and again. The trouble was that I was listening to the Lesson of the Master at the wrong time, paying powerful and excessive attention at the wrong time; and this cost me my youth." T. S. Eliot, Miss Ozick complained some years ago, cost her her adolescent faith in literary greatness; and now poor James is said to have cost her her youth. Is there no limit to her rationalizations of failure?

Others are less ambivalent about their subjects. John Gregory Dunne engagingly paints his adoptive daughter Quintana, and Bruce Chatwin creates a charming portrait of "Paul A— F— Bey," an elderly "relic of the Ottoman empire," a figure adrift in post-revolutionary Europe now serving as *Grand Chamberlain du Cour du Roi des Albanis.* The Bey has seen better days, is now a buyer, and he is obliged to haggle and hedge in his purchases from Sotheby's, where young Chatwin is a porter in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities. But the Bey retains his superlative taste and his discriminating eye for the acquisition and appreciation of beautiful works of art. "I write about the Bey," Chatwin concludes, "because people of his kind will never come again. His life, I suspect, was a bit of a sham. The Eye was always young and pure."

Bertrand Russell's "Joseph Conrad" likewise offers a brilliant summation of the intellectual temper of the novelist, whose

> point of view was far from modern. In the modern world there are two philosophies: the one, which stems from Rousseau, and sweeps aside discipline as unnecessary; the other, which finds its fullest expression in totalitarianism, which thinks of discipline as essentially imposed

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> from without. Conrad adhered to the older tradition, that discipline should come from within. He despised indiscipline, and hated discipline that was merely external.

Russell thought well of the self-disciplined Conrad, despite the novelist's clear aversion to the utopian socialism Russell espoused, so well indeed that he even named his son John Conrad Russell.

Places are also lovingly re-created in the personal essays that Mr. Epstein has brought together here. Mencken is salty but still nostalgic in his recollection of the old Baltimore, before the fire of 1904 changed the city, a grand old time when newspaper reporters only aspired to own "two complete suits of clothes." E. B. White, in "Once More to the Lake," loves the landscape of his youth because going to the woods and the lake nullified time and returned him intact to his childhood. James Baldwin makes us feel what it is like to be the only black in the Alpine Swiss village where he frequently summered. Eudora Welty is also splendid in "The Little Store," the place where her parents regularly sent her on errands. Who else than Miss Welty could have caught so expertly the "happiness of errands"—the happiness of a child's "running for the moment away from home, a free spirit."

A number of the essays are about sleep and dreams, including daydreams and insomnia. In Winston Churchill's "The Dream," the prime minister's dead father comes back to life, as his portrait is being painted by the son, and asks a series of shrewd questions about the political makeup of postwar Britain. Dawn Powell's "What Are You Doing in My Dreams?" is about the impossibility of escaping one's Ohio past. The dead, for her, "always have to be on the go, and no matter how I beg to be let alone, the minute I close my eyes, there they are tugging at me, pulling me along on the picnic, my grandmother yanking one of my arms as if it was a chicken wing, my Aunt Dawn holding the other."

Nightmares are common enough, but I thought I was the only one who had nocturnal visions of glory. It turns out that the insomniac F. Scott Fitzgerald had them too. Here he is in the "crack-up" phase, trying to get to sleep.

> "Once upon a time" (I tell myself) "they needed a quarterback at Princeton, and they had nobody and were in despair. The head coach noticed me kicking and passing on the side of the field, and he cried: 'Who is *that* man—why haven't we noticed *him* before?' The under coach answered: 'He hasn't been out,' and the response was: 'Bring him in.'
>
> " . . . we go to the day of the Yale game. I weigh only one hundred and thirty-five, so they save me until the third quarter with the score—"
>
> —But it's no use. I have used that dream of a defeated dream to induce sleep for almost twenty years, but it has worn thin at last.

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I have been luckier. In my case, I still invariably drift off to sleep dreaming of standing at the plate in the ninth inning at the old Sportsman's Park in St. Louis, the game tied and the bases loaded. The hometown Cardinals of the 1940s are rooting me on from the dugout. This is the team of Stan "The Man" Musial, Enos Slaughter, and Harry "The Cat" Brecheen, who had the smoothest delivery of any southpaw who ever played the game. Naturally, to the roar of a delirious crowd, my booming home run lands somewhere on the other side of the Mississippi River. The effect is automatic: Z-z-z-z-z-z.

Reality never did live up to the glory of Fitzgerald's dream, nor did it in my case. Fitzgerald wasn't dropped from the team because he weighed 135. The reality is that during tryouts for the Princeton team, he ducked an open-field tackle, one that he should have made, and so got a reputation for being "yellow." Not making the team, he said, wrecked his college career; and in after years, in his cups, he sent Saturday afternoon telegrams to the Princeton coach, during the game, advising him on the winning strategy. In my own case, I prudently retired from baseball at the tender age of sixteen when I stepped up to the plate in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Facing a wiry young kid with a whip for an arm, I swung mightily and got hit in the chest by a ninety-mile-an-hour fastball. I don't believe I even saw the pitch. Even more humiliating, I wasn't even awarded first base, since I had swung at the ball. (I did, though, see the light.)

In his introductory essay, Mr. Epstein makes the point that "if one has a defect in one's personality, the personal essay is likely to show it up. (Self-congratulation, or the imputation of virtue to oneself, is one of the great traps of the personal essay.)" This offhand observation exploded into brilliant clarity for me when I read Barbara Tuchman's "An Author's Mail." This essay pretends to be an account of the kinds of mail received by a popular, award-winning historian. Her mail included letters from lost friends, cranks, admirers, unfortunates seeking some remedy, prisoners, and Vietnam veterans who thought she got the war just right. Suffusing the essay, however, like cheap perfume in a small elevator, is an egotism so gross, unconscious, and self-congratulatory that I, for one, was repelled by the woman (as I think the sly Mr. Epstein meant me to be).

I have been using Norton anthologies in various classrooms for twenty or thirty years now. They are well-edited, well-made, and nothing if not inclusive and comprehensive collections. Norton is in touch with every contemporary literary trend and tendency and leaves nothing to chance. If this is the age of feminism, black studies, gay studies, and that catchall "multiculturalism," one can be confident that a Norton anthology will satisfy every conceivable aggrieved minority and so represent every possible angle of identity politics. I have a lurking suspicion that Mr. Epstein was issued certain guidelines for selecting essays—so that women, blacks, Latinos, Jewish-Americans, Irish-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc., etc., were represented.

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In any case, they are all here. But instead of the litany of complaints that we usually encounter about how awful it is to be black or a woman or a Latino, Mr. Epstein has allowed members of these groups to declare themselves as individuals resistant to such narrowing political classifications. Frank O'Connor's comic "In Quest of Beer" is a paean to the Irish public house, the exact character of which, in contrast to English pubs or American saloons, had heretofore eluded me. Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored" is a wonderful exception to the usual tale of racial woe. She is not, she writes, "tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes." She says that she does not "belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it." She remarks that "at certain times I have no race, I am *me*," and she is most herself when she sets her hat "at a certain angle and saunter[s] down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City." In this essay we feel that we are in the presence of a real personality, an engaging woman we would like to know. Not that she hasn't felt racial discrimination, but her response is most unusual for our time: "It merely astonishes me. How *can* any deny themselves the pleasure of my company. It's beyond me." It's beyond me too.

Richard Rodriguez, in "Going Home Again," has written in a most moving way about how an education in English graduate studies alienated him from his Mexican-American parents. The estrangement was not merely linguistic but broadly cultural and implied a shift in class. In his view, higher education itself estranges all children from their less educated parents, even if they speak the same language. I can attest to the truth of this poignant fact, as (aside from the *Reader's Digest*) the several religious journals and *one book* (the good one) were all my parents thought I needed. In any case Mr. Rodriguez believes that higher education and especially the academic culture of the university estrange the young person by acclimating him to "a society increasingly anonymous and impersonal" and lacking in the vibrancy of the ethnic world that is left behind.

Shelby Steele, in "On Being Black and Middle Class," writes of the disturbing "pattern of racial identification that emerged in the sixties and that still prevails today." It is a pattern that asks blacks to see themselves as "an embattled minority." It "urges an adversarial stance toward the mainstream," emphasizes "ethnic consciousness over individualism," and "is organized around an implied separatism." This is the viewpoint that prevails in politics, in the press, and in ethnic studies courses. What is rare in Mr. Epstein's essay selection of black authors is that the adversarial stance here described makes no sense to most of them. Shelby Steele and other middle-class blacks were raised to believe in "the work ethic, the importance of education, the value of property ownership, of respectability, of 'getting ahead,' of stable family life, of initiative, of self-reliance, etc." These expressions of American individualism happen to be the values that most mainstream white Americans

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hold dear. Yet although he too holds to these values, the middle-class black is obliged to "identify with a degree of victimization" that is "beyond his actual experience." And the temptation to do so is very great because "the sense of innocence that is always entailed in feeling victimized" fills the middle-class black with "a corresponding feeling of entitlement, or even license," that helps him to endure his vulnerability. Steele's moving account makes plain to me why I have always felt more identification with some middle-class blacks than with some whites.

In sum, while *The Norton Book of Personal Essays* acknowledges the reality of multiculturalism in the 1990s, how wonderful it is to find ethnic writing selected on some basis other than "the victimization thing." These essays, superb in their richness and variety, were chosen, as Mr. Epstein puts it, "because I liked them, found them interesting, touching, pleasing, amusing, delightful—above all, entertaining." What it comes down to, then, is the anthologist's wide experience of the familiar form—and a taste, judgment, and discrimination developed and refined by prolonged reflection on this form of art. If you want a guide to good writing, Mr. Epstein is surely one of the best.

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RICHARD TILLINGHAST

Poetry Chronicle

WHILE PERUSING SOME THIRTY NEW BOOKS in preparation for writing this chronicle, and narrowing the selection to five, I have been struck by the vitality of new voices, the hardy persistence of veteran poets whose presence is all too easy to take for granted, the continuing vigor of the metrical tradition, and by the variety of what is being written and published. The pervasiveness of irony in many of these poems has also led me to ask questions about this double-sided approach to rhetoric.

Another question, in addition to wondering about irony, that engaged my attention while reading these books was whether poets chose to write what might be called the "situated" poem, or the "statement" poem. Both have long histories. An example of the statement poem might be Philip Larkin's "This Be the Verse," which begins "They fuck you up, your mum and dad. / They may not mean to, but they do." The mum and dad are generic parents, the "you" is everyone. A situated poem in the same Freudian mode is Robert Lowell's "Man and Wife," which begins, "Tamed by *Miltown*, we lie on Mother's bed; / the rising sun in war paint dyes us red." The mum here is Charlotte Winslow Lowell of Boston, whose troubled psychological legacy is represented by an antique bed, part of the inherited "loot" that occupies so much of the poet's attention in *Life Studies*.

Situated poems are, accurately, associated with the modern era; think of "The Wild Swans at Coole" by Yeats: "The trees are in their autumn beauty, / The woodland paths are dry . . . " But then one remembers Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," published in 1798, where the scenery of the Wye Valley triggers a reverie: "Once again / Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs, / That on a wild secluded scene impress / Thoughts of more deep seclusion."

In truth the type goes back centuries. John Donne's "Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day," 1633, begins, " 'Tis the year's midnight, and it is the day's," a location in time even more precise than Lowell's "These are the tranquilized *Fifties*, / and I am forty." Yet even as early as the reign of James I, poets were clever enough to adopt the pose of general statement and then narrow it to fit a particular case, as Sir Walter Ralegh did in his touching and witty sonnet, "Three Things There Be," a warning from the Tower to his profligate son.

Still, more than any other period in literary history, the twentieth century has favored the situated poem, with its reliance on imagery and particularity. This is David Wojahn's approach in *The Falling Hour*, a

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stunning and disturbing evocation of intense situations and states of mind.[1] Making it real for the reader is always uppermost in Wojahn's mind. Yet in "Excavation Photo," recounting the moment his wife discovers she has breast cancer, Wojahn questions the use of trying to make the reader experience the event as vividly as the couple themselves: "what profit would / such knowledge give you?" he wonders. "Would you hear our bedside clock? Cars outside in the rain?— / & where is she now? Could you tell me / that much?"

Whatever doubts he may have about his approach, no contemporary poet writes the situated poem more vividly and convincingly than David Wojahn. Here he is in a bar during the O.J. Simpson trial listening to Jimi Hendrix's "Hey, Joe" on the jukebox: "For Hendrix it's a sweet slow blues, Stratocaster / pummeling leisurely the opening bars, / a gracile firestorm . . . " However different the cultural furniture, Wojahn's "Hey, Joe" is a bar poem solidly in the tradition of Auden's "September 1, 1939." Using an informal, three-beat line, Auden situates himself as follows: "I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-Second Street / Uncertain and afraid . . . " Then he goes on to adumbrate his vision of the world on the eve of World War II, coming in, toward the end of the poem, to define his own role as the world he has known marches toward catastrophe:

> All I have is a voice
> To undo the folded lie,
> The romantic lie in the brain
> Of the sensual man-in-the-street
> And the lie of Authority
> Whose buildings grope the sky . . .

Wojahn's presence in his poem is even more circumspect and unobtrusive than Auden's. He is just a guy sitting in a bar, but the poem's drama is the drama of his own thoughts and perceptions. He employs a collage method, layering the words of the song "Hey, Joe" with television images of the trial and of a beer commercial—placing the action, by allusion, within the circles of Dante's *Inferno.* It's a dazzling feat of perceptual writing:

> *thousands drowned, the whole sea turned to blood . . .* ? What
> Circle
> where the football player's puffy, once-cherubic face
> gives way to med-lab footage, white coats

[1] THE FALLING HOUR, by *David Wojahn.* University of Pittsburgh Press. $25.00; $12.95.

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sloshing beakers, then the blurred-paisley twitch
of cell division, fat DNA on all four TVs,
metaphase and anaphase, beside a team

of bar-light Clydesdales? What Circle? *Where you*
goin' with that gun? . . . How comes it now
that thou art out of hell?

The poem (and of course quoting snippets doesn't do it justice) brilliantly evokes contemporary American culture and suggests the interdependence of the circles within which we live: the circles of Hell, the patterns of DNA, the conflicting imperatives of crime and punishment, and how these latter play a role in the black music that figures so largely in the entertainment many of us choose for ourselves.

That Wojahn is ultimately unable to sustain the torrid intensity he reaches during the first thirty-five pages is not surprising. In a book driven to visit Jonestown, Waco, a hospital emergency room, a classroom where one of the students is a neo-Nazi, the Bay of Pigs, to consider feral children, to write about the blues singer Howlin' Wolf, to address itself to a hundred other kinds of extremity, Wojahn's energy inevitably flags. Toward the end of *The Falling Hour*, enervation sets in, and the collage method loses its freshness. Still, while the flame of David Wojahn's poetry burns, it burns white-hot.

Miller Williams favors what I have termed the statement poem.[2] He comes across as a man so thoroughly at ease with himself that he can write whatever he damn well pleases. "A Lesson on the Twentieth Century" puts our technology into perspective by trying to see how it might look to an observer from the future. Here are the first few lines:

They rode around in auto-mobiles,
metal sitting rooms that sat on wheels
and coursed a network of concrete
laid down by labor, a grid of street across street
inside the cities, and on the countryside
long winding ribbons sometimes laid so wide
eight of the units could run along together,
half going one direction and half the other.

Williams is gifted with a view of ordinary life relieved of illusion and sentimentality that makes his non-situated poems just as vivid as if they came equipped with settings and the other establishing devices. In "As You Both Shall Live," a picture of a marriage comes through so

[2] THE WAYS WE TOUCH, by *Miller Williams*. University of Illinois Press. $16.95.

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convincingly that the reader fleshes out the details easily in his own mind. Here are the first ten lines:

> I'm sorry, I'm really just too tired tonight.
> I think she's a little young to have a date.
> I don't see how we can afford that.
> It's fine. I just don't have any appetite.
> I thought we'd watch it together. It starts at eight.
> I still don't understand what you're getting at.
> There are things I can do and things I can't.
> It's been longer than that. Like a couple of weeks.
> I told you about it. You said to go ahead.
> She's just someone I know. She works at the plant.

There is wisdom in Miller Williams' poems, not least in the section called "Admonitions," where he frankly endeavors to speak to his descendants. Nothing could be farther not only from recent trends in poetry, but from the Modernism of the past eighty years, which in the critical jargon of the day, "fetishizes" whatever seems new. But something like what Williams attempts is what everyone with children would like to be able to leave to his progeny, living and as yet unborn. These are maxims, with a distinctly old-fashioned ring to them. "Be nearly too stubborn to change, but never quite. / Be kind, when you can. When you cannot, be right." In these memorable poems, Miller Williams adds to our store of wisdom literature, as old as the biblical Book of Proverbs.

The Bounty, by Derek Walcott, reveals the Caribbean-born Nobel laureate in a contemplative mood, reflecting on his life and on his island home, St. Lucia.[3] In "Spain" and "Italian Eclogues" he expatiates on landscapes and cultures other than his own. He is at his best, however, when focusing on the two themes he has made indelibly his own: the island where he lives, and the way the culture and history of the Caribbean are fatefully intertwined with the geographically faraway continent of Europe. Walcott is a past master of the situated poem—situated as to place, culture, and history at many levels.

The writing here displays the defects of its qualities. The tone of unhurried contemplation, the long lines and blocks of verse allow Walcott plenty of breathing room; his poetry at its best rises to a grandeur hardly ever seen in these depressingly plainspoken days. The current book has its share of longueurs, however, and I think some of this may be attributed to Walcott's formal choices: page after page presents blocks of print unbroken into stanzas (though the title poem employs tercets and a rhyme scheme loosely based on *terza rima*). In an elegy to Joseph Brodsky he says, "You refreshed forms and stanzas."

[3] THE BOUNTY, by *Derek Walcott*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $18.00.

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Perhaps Walcott himself should consider returning to some of the marvelously varied technical experimentation of his early work.

But my impression is that he indulges himself here on purpose. The sameness of the verse form allows him, when the Muse is attentive, to go deeply into his moods and perceptions. Passages in this book are simply gorgeous—grand and inventive, down-to-earth and elevated at the same time. Here, from the title poem, is a variation on a line by Dante:

> "*In la sua volonta è nostra pace,*"
> In His will is our peace. Peace in white harbors,
> in marinas whose masts agree, in crescent melons
>
> left all night in the fridge, in the Egyptian labours
> of ants moving boulders of sugar, words in this sentence,
> shadow and light, who live next door like neighbours . . .

"The Bounty" is both an elegy for the poet's mother and a poetic credo in which lines of ants are an emblem for the poetic line: "let the ants teach me again with the long lines of words, / my business and duty, the lesson you taught your sons, / to write of the light's bounty on familiar things / that stand on the verge of translating themselves into news . . . "

If cultural theorists have reduced postcolonial experience to a massive yawn, that's not Derek Walcott's fault. His evocations of the imperial center as sensed from a distant colonial outpost—humorous, celebratory at times, perceptively critical but never strident or posturing—are among the glories of late-twentieth-century poetry. The four-part sequence "Signs" shows that Europe's mythic presence in the mind of the colonial subject has not ceased to excite Walcott to some of his best writing:

> Europe fulfilled its silhouette in the nineteenth century
> with steaming train-stations, gas-lamps, encyclopedias,
> the expanding waists of empires, an appetite for inventory
> in the novel as a market roaring with ideas.
> Bound volumes echoed city-blocks of paragraphs
> with ornate parenthetical doorways, crowds on one margin
> waiting to cross to the other page . . .

Today's bright idea in cultural criticism is to reduce everything to "commodity"; Walcott shows he is aware of that idea, but demonstrates that the interplay between ideas and goods, art and power, setting and spirit, the insubstantial and the quantifiable, is much more complex and interesting than the essentially Marxist notion that art is an effluence rising from the push and shove of economics: "We become one of those, then, / who convert the scarves of cirrus at dusk to a diva's / adieu from an opera balcony, ceilings of cherubs, cornucopias / disgorging stone

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fruit, the setting for a believer's / conviction in healing music . . . " Walcott has always been, in the broad sense, a believer; and that is what makes his poetry, at its best, such powerful spiritual nourishment.

A feature of American spiritual life from the Plymouth Colony to Jonestown to the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco, has been the intentional, utopian spiritual community. John Wood, in the twenty-six-page title series of his second collection, brings to life the mid-nineteenth-century Hoadeite movement.[4] Wilhelm Johannes Hoade emigrated to the United States with a group of followers in the 1840s and established an agricultural community in Kansas with messianic and socialistic overtones. The Second Coming was expected in 1857. Hoade died five years before this event was to occur.

Hoade's voice, as delivered through John Wood's rhapsodic free verse, rises in lyrical, prophetic periods where the visionary harmonizes with the homely and the erotic:

> *. . . let girls*
> *weep for rapturous rinks and angel-boys askate and sweating*
> *round an erect and risen Christ; let the world*
> *hunger for their preacher's yeasty breath, his rising hands,*
> *the born-again moment immersed in Christ's ejaculant fire . . .*

Hoade's metaphors of the divine bridegroom with the church as his bride would make the author of the Song of Songs blush.

Wood's sensibility is essentially religious. His first book, *In Primary Light* (1994), which received less notice than it deserves, showed that he is, in Marianne Moore's phrase, a "literalist of the imagination" with a slightly different emphasis from what Moore had in mind. That is, Wood subsumes the imagination inherent in religious prophecy into his own imagination, taking it very seriously, i.e., very literally. Here are a few lines from "The Bitter Part of Heaven" in Wood's first book:

> This is heaven's bitter part
> where all the dead from the *Enquirer*'s pages
> are housed whole again but in anger
> at irony and excess. Their eyeballs
> have turned right again, hacked heads
> have found their proper bodies, the mountains
> of dog food ground by angry sons
> or husbands have reconstituted.

Some would see the infamous Southern Gothic here, but I wonder if it might not be more to the point to say that the Southern writer has traditionally avoided the temptation of self-indulgent, free-floating

[4] THE GATES OF THE ELECT KINGDOM, by *John Wood.* University of Iowa Press. $10.95p.

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abstraction that is the bane of American poetry in the closing years of the century. This newly fashionable abstraction represents "statement" poetry with a screw loose—pure vagueness taking a walk on the wild side.

John Wood's imagination, with one foot on the ground and one dipped in the River Jordan, brings unforgettably to life the homely and visionary mind that has yearned for spiritual utopia in the New World. Here is a lyrical glimpse of the last surviving Hoadeite as she remembers in her old age the glory days of the community:

> . . . her childhood did blaze
> again and again when she spoke of taste or smell
> or the color of what never quite turned Paradise:
> the red flare-fall of elm and oak; or new mown fields
> baled and lofted up, seizing whole barns with scents sweeter,
> said Hoade, than Hiram's cedared palace and all glittering Tyre . . .

The peculiarly American irony of "what never quite turned Paradise"—Paradise sought-for on this continent and never quite found—is one of several ironies in the work of the first four poets under consideration here. David Wojahn uses the collage method to create a situated poem that shocks us with the multiple contradictions implicit in our culture. Miller Williams, while relying on the statement poem, is nevertheless able to bring to light, around the edges of his words, the inconsistencies in our lives. The large irony in Derek Walcott's poems, so thoroughly situated in their time and place, inheres in the fading dream of a cosmopolitan culture, the dissolving cloud that was "Europe" glimpsed from a distant frontier. For John Wood the ironies are theological; but they too are firmly situated in language, that membrane through which poetry breathes, that web that catches and holds onto the words of the self-proclaimed prophet and the confused citizen sitting in a bar, "uncertain and afraid," whose sole possession is his voice.

Talking about irony may be another way of talking about a sense of tragedy. Something that interests me about *The Bunker in the Parsley Fields*, by Gary Gildner, is that irony is less evident in his poems than it is in the four other books I have written about here.[5] It's not entirely that Gildner is unaware of nuance, disappointment, and mixed emotions; it's almost as if he has made a conscious determination to emphasize innocent and joyful moments, as in this refreshing little poem, "Playing Catch with My Daughter":

> I remember the walnuts
> uncurling, the lilacs on call,
> the day's sweet revolution

[5] THE BUNKER IN THE PARSLEY FIELDS, by *Gary Gildner*. University of Iowa Press. $10.95p.

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and verdurous smell.
I had just cut the grass.
And yes,
when she kicked out
and followed through
all that green day,
how the little spears flew.

The language tends to be simple, the verse so close to prose as to make one long for the way a poet like Walcott constructs his lines with sound and rhythm. The first few lines of a poem like "Flicker," for example, might just as well have been written out as prose, which is what they are: "After I lit the sticks and closed / the door to my wood stove, / I heard a commotion inside / sounding like leaves pushed around / by wind . . . " Here, too, is the first stanza of "On Certain Cold Days," which begins:

On certain cold days
I wear a wool shirt
that belonged to my father.
I also have his hammer
and the last pencil he used—
the one tool we have in common.

Has irony, like the situated poem which Gildner writes, become a staple of modern poetry from T.S. Eliot to the present? Robert Bly and other stalwarts of the movement associated with his magazine *The Fifties* (later *The Sixties*) thought that irony had become almost a mannerism, a limiting stance. Everything that is appealing about this argument makes Gary Gildner's poetry appealing. Residents of the Eastern United States might be tempted to speak of Gildner's poetry as "Western," just as the school of Bly and James Wright was sometimes spoken of as "Midwestern": affirmative, sincere, straightforward.

So I wish I could like Gildner's poetry a bit more than I do. Some of his poems come across as not just simple but simplistic. There are mitigating considerations, though. "In Puerto Rico, She Says," begins with a story about courtship on the island: "when boy meets girl / and so on, first / they are *amiguitos* / which means for example / a nice little walk, nothing / enormous, maybe a stop for / coconut at a *bohio* / to fix up their thirst. Okay." And so on while the plot thickens. But just when you feel this is an oversimplification of one culture by someone from another, you remember the "She Says" in the title, and it dawns on you that the author does have a little mild irony in him after all, that he is gently spoofing the way a Puerto Rican friend explains something about life on the island for a *Norteamericano*: "in Puerto Rico / east, west, north, and south / mean nothing— / only left, right, / up, and down. / If you are lost / drive fifteen minutes / then stop and ask. / It's like that for example. / Very easy."

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BRUCE BAWER

Millennial Bookbag

THE WONDER IS NOT THAT NORMAN MAILER HAS WRITTEN A NOVEL about Jesus Christ told in the first person; the wonder is that it took so many of us by surprise. After all, he has always been intrigued by—and has always strongly identified with—public figures of mythic proportions (*Marilyn, Picasso*), people charged with capital crimes (*The Executioner's Song*), and those in positions of power (one of his books is entitled *The Presidential Papers of Norman Mailer*). How else to cap off his career, as the millennium looms, than by writing *The Gospel According to the Son?*[1]

Perhaps Mailer's own family history also influenced his selection of theme. For his maternal grandfather was, like Jesus, a rebel rabbi. Peter Manso's 1985 oral biography of Mailer quotes the novelist's cousin Marjorie as saying that Rabbi Schneider worked for free, was lenient about dogma and dietary laws, and chose to freelance rather than have a formal congregation "because he said that rabbis were *schnorrers.*" (Jesus was no less blunt about them in Matthew 23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity.")

Mailer's studies of Marilyn Monroe and Picasso were criticized for leaning overmuch on biographies by other writers. In this novel, Mailer likewise borrows heavily from his predecessors—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. (Fortunately for him, there's not much chance of a lawsuit this time around.) Indeed the most surprising thing about Mailer's *Gospel* is that he's brought very little imagination to bear on his material—as compared, say, to Nikos Kazantzakis, who brilliantly imagined Jesus' inner life in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, or even to the Portuguese writer José Saramago, whose *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, an essentially orthodox retelling which appeared in English in 1994, is composed in a beautiful, original style far removed from those of the canonical gospels. (Mailer, by contrast, tries to sound biblically austere and formal: "How beautiful was the sun upon the water of the Sea of Galilee.")

Alongside these books, Mailer's is astonishingly tame. He hugs the shore, adhering closely—one might almost say timidly—to the scriptural narratives. For over a century, so-called Higher Critics have questioned the historicity of much that is in the gospels; not Mailer, who accepts the

[1] THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE SON, by *Norman Mailer.* Random House. $22.00.

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reality of every last one of Jesus' miracles (but does nothing interesting with them) and of the physical resurrection. His Mary actually does recite the Magnificat; his Jesus takes his first breath in a Bethlehem manger, though only fundamentalist theologians now continue to deny that Jesus was actually born in Nazareth. Mailer even embraces wholeheartedly the parts of the Jesus story that are universally agreed—except, again, among fundamentalists—to have been invented by the gospel writers in order to placate the Romans and demonize the Jews.

There are, in short, no shocking revelations here, no challenging vision, and only the occasional non-traditional element: Mary and Joseph belong to the celibate Essene community; the Devil (in a wicked little Mailerian touch) is a feminist; Jesus has a carpenter's familiarity with lumber, and a mystical relationship with it—which takes on poignancy when he lugs the Cross to Golgotha. Perhaps the most daring twist here is that Judas commits his act of betrayal because he is an idealist, disillusioned by a seemingly scornful remark (Matthew 26:11) that Jesus makes about the poor.

What is this novel's *raison d'être*? Mailer's Jesus tells us at the outset that the canonical gospels are unreliable—that's why he's narrated this one. This book is so faithful to the canonical gospels, however, that the explanation makes no sense. Mailer's attempts to provide glimpses of the interior Jesus are feeble; America's Most Famous Novelist, alas, seems to have no notion at all of what it might mean to have a spiritual life. It is astonishing that such a reliably provocative (if uneven) writer could produce such a pointless book on such a monumental theme.

To turn from Mailer's gospel to any of a number of new books on the people and events of the Bible is to escape the shackles of premodern biblical literalism for the flux and tumult of contemporary scriptural investigation, discovery, and conjecture. In *Gospel Truth: The New Image of Jesus Emerging from Science and History, and Why It Matters*,[2] Russell Shorto provides an engaging—indeed, positively zippy—account of the ongoing attempt by many scholars to see beyond the Jesus presented by the gospel writers and to discover the real Jesus of history. A contributor to *GQ*, Shorto emphasizes personalities and conflict, and writes in a glossy-magazine celebrity-profile style: John the Baptist, examined in a chapter entitled "The Big Dipper," is described as "a hell and brimstone kind of guy"; the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is labeled "ground zero for Christianity."

Yet despite his slangy, hype-heavy approach, Shorto does a splendid job of explaining to a lay audience the rationale of the quest for the historical Jesus—and, in particular, of the Jesus Seminar, a group of theologians whose pronouncements on these matters, while unshocking to any non-fundamentalist seminarian, have been treated as scandalous

[2] GOSPEL TRUTH: The New Image of Jesus Emerging from Science and History, and Why It Matters, by *Russell Shorto*. Riverhead. $24.95.

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in the mainstream media. Though some readers may consider bookstore shelves to be already overcrowded with historical-Jesus titles, moreover, Shorto proves a useful guide to those titles, distinguishing among the gospels according to Burton Mack, John Dominic Crossan, and E.P. Sanders, three representative historical-Jesus scholars who, respectively, reject the gospels' historicity almost entirely, see Jesus as a student of the Greek Cynics, and view him as an apocalyptic Jewish prophet.

Shorto acknowledges the circularity of some Jesus Seminar logic ("Regarding Jesus' admonition to 'go nowhere among the Gentiles,' for example," he writes, "the Jesus Seminar has voted against its authenticity on the grounds that 'a restricted mission was not characteristic of Jesus'—a conclusion reached by negating the authenticity of exactly such sayings"), but generally welcomes their work as an attempt to reconcile faith and reason. He devotes a chapter apiece to Jesus' miracles, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the kingdom of heaven, and Christianity's Greek and Hebrew backgrounds. Particularly interesting is his coverage of the Essene influence on Jesus' teachings: " 'the poor' and 'the poor in spirit,' " he notes, "seem to be names the Essenes used to refer to themselves. . . . Jesus' admonition to 'turn the other cheek,' unknown in the Hebrew Bible and until recently thought to be pure Jesus, appears in the Essenes' Manual of Discipline." For those who haven't yet braved the heady waters of historical-Jesus scholarship but are curious about it, *Gospel Truth* is probably the best place to start.

Peter Gomes, a distinguished Baptist preacher who is Harvard University's official chaplain, has written a good book about the Good Book and has called it *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart.*[3] He begins by telling us what the Bible is—"a collection of books" that "belongs to the community of believers," that is "dynamic, living, alive, lively," and that is "inclusive," having "the power to draw all people unto itself"—and how we shouldn't read it: we shouldn't succumb to "bibliolatry" (i.e., bible worship), to literalism (or, as fundamentalists like to put it, "the Bible says what it means and means what it says"), or to "culturism" (the use of scripture "to support the status quo, no matter what the status quo, and despite the revolutionary origins and implications of scripture itself"). Gomes then discusses "the uses and abuses of the Bible" in American history: its use as a prop for slavery and then racial segregation, as an excuse for hating Jews, subordinating women, and demonizing homosexuals, and as a foundation for the temperance, abolitionist, and civil-rights movements.

This part of Gomes' book—its first half, more or less—has received considerable media attention. The second half, which is less easily adapted to media purposes, hasn't. In these pages, having shown how the Bible should not be read, Gomes shows us how it should. Some of

[3] THE GOOD BOOK: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart, by *Peter Gomes.* William Morrow. $25.00.

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the chapter subtitles suggest the drift of his thought: "Am I On My Own?" "How Can I Face the Future?" "What Dare We Make of Suffering?" And indeed the book does drift in its second half, meandering from one pastoral theme to another, from the meaning of joy to the nature of evil, from the obligations of wealth to the experience of the miraculous. Gomes emerges throughout as a fine and thoughtful pastoral counselor, more conservative than some might expect, never glib, and more willing than many sophisticated ministers to take a hard, frank look at evil.

Gomes draws a crucial distinction well when he writes that religion "is not the answer to the unknowable or the unfaceable or the unendurable; religion is what we do and what we are in the face of the unknowable, the unfaceable, and the unendurable." Invoking the Celtic notion of "thin places" of suffering, joy, and mystery where "the visible and the invisible world come into their closest proximity," he suggests that we learn to think of the Bible as "the place where not only others long dead but we ourselves encounter those thin places." The Bible, he concludes, "is a book not about limits but about infinity, and visions, not history minus but poetry plus. The Bible represents the longing of the human imagination to find expression for itself in infinity." *The Good Book* is a moderate and meticulous work that contains few short, punchy sentences and almost no dashes and parentheses (except for those around Biblical citations); though Gomes is black and gay, his language remains temperate and conciliatory even when he is discussing the abuse of scripture by racists and homophobes. His book, in short, is as sober and restrained as Shorto's is fast and flashy.

Flashiness—along with irreverence—is certainly the order of the day in *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* by the British novelist and critic A.N. Wilson.[4] If Gomes is extremely delicate and respectful in challenging "bible-believer" superstitions, Wilson seems hell-bent on jolting the pious. Like many books by today's leading British men of letters, *Paul* has an offhand, even sloppy quality ("Nero kicked her to death while pregnant"; "Christ is not a name it is a title") as well as loads of verve; the idea is to seem not to be trying too hard while conveying something of the wit, energy, and cozy insouciance of Oxbridgean chitchat. At this, Wilson succeeds: *Paul* quite engagingly limns the social and cultural contexts within which Paul wrote and sets forth Wilson's view of Paul's impact on Christian belief past, present, and to come.

To put it briefly, Wilson (who has also written a book on Jesus) sees Christianity as Paul's creation—an apocalyptic, primitive, but powerful faith that would never have gotten off the ground without him, and that he essentially shaped around his own bizarre but brilliant ideas about who Jesus of Nazareth had been and what his life and death had signified. In Wilson's view, Paul (who "believed that he had cracked the

[4] PAUL: The Mind of the Apostle, by *A.N. Wilson*. W.W. Norton. $25.00.

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'secret'—to use his word—of what Judaism was") turned an apocalyptic rabbi who otherwise wouldn't have made the Big Time into a commodity that, tailored brilliantly to the religious marketplace of the day, sold like hotcakes around the globe. Paul accomplished this, Wilson argues, largely by making audacious and inspired use of language, rituals, beliefs, and images that had currency in sundry religious systems that were popular in various parts of the Empire with which he was familiar.

Wilson observes, for example, that while the idea of consuming God's body and blood would have appalled Jews, the cult of Mithra, which was then all the rage in Paul's hometown of Tarsus, featured an initiation ritual that involved drinking either bull blood or wine symbolizing that blood. Also worshipped in Tarsus were savior gods, among them Herakles (a.k.a. Hercules), who was ritually burnt every autumn but who "would rise to life again in the spring, at about the time when the Jews were celebrating the Passover." Wilson further points out that the Pharisees "would bless themselves with the sacred letter *T*, tracing it from forehead, to breast, and across from shoulder to shoulder—a custom which was understandably discarded when it was taken up by the Christians and called 'making the sign of the cross.' "

These are, to be sure, provocative parallels. But Wilson soft-pedals the extreme difference between, say, the meaning of Mithraic sacrifices and of the eucharist, and exaggerates the importance of Paul's writings in the formation of later Christian belief while diminishing the role of the gospels. Shorto points out in his book that the decentralized Pharisaic (rabbinical) Judaism that survived the first-century Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and that existed alongside Christianity was very different from the earlier Judaism that had focused on the Temple and its Sadducees (or priests). Wilson makes much the same point but puts it this way: "only two strands of 'Judaism' were sufficiently vigorous to survive the destruction: Pharisaism and Christianity." He turns modern Judaism and Christianity, in other words, into two branches of Judaism, both different from—and both heirs to—the Judaism of Moses. This formulation seems almost designed to send readers of both faiths into fits of apoplexy. (Yet Wilson is surely right to point out—as he does frequently—that we should not read our own knowledge of later Christian history into Paul's writings, which do not include the word *Christian* at all.)

Maintaining that Paul's religion is so extreme "that few in later Christian generations were able to match or to follow," Wilson suggests that most Christians

> have been only too happy to select a few favourite passages from Paul's letters and to ignore the disturbing, the devastating, implications of the whole. That is, that the human will has no freedom whatsoever; the human endeavour to pursue the good is at best foolish, at worst a sort of blasphemy outside the Covenant. . . . In Paul's poem about the universe—it is too ecstatic, too jagged, too

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> hither and thither to be described in his writings as a system—the sheer terribleness of God's justice, the absolute ruthlessness of it and its arbitrariness are set against the Cross. He makes of the dying Jesus as it were a Prometheus to challenge the cruelty of the First Cause; but unlike those who take comfort in the Prometheus myth, Paul never once suggests that the First Cause has any reason to show love and mercy. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth." Only the "love" of God, and the love of God alone—Paul has to invent a new word for it—can provide hope. That hope can come only with the complete surrender of will, mind and heart to Christ.

This passage represents Wilson at his best—as a poet (like Paul) who does have a special grasp of Paul's own brilliance and (perhaps) madness. Yet there is a difference between the genius of Paul and the religion of Jesus. Even as millions of legalistic Christians today espouse a faith that owes much to the darker imaginings of what Wilson calls Paul's "almost Nietzschean mind," there are also millions of people who strive to live out a Christianity that is as consistent as possible with the ministry of Jesus himself—a ministry (it must be said) whose deepest meanings Paul, at his best, seems to have understood very well.

A less feisty but equally compelling new revisionistic look at Christian history is Christine Leigh Heyrman's *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt.*[5] From her study of the diaries and other remnants of early Baptist and Methodist ministers, Heyrman, an associate professor of history at the University of Delaware, has gleaned ample—and fascinating—evidence that the founders of the white Southern evangelical tradition held attitudes on race, sex roles, and parent-child relations that their presumed heirs on today's Religious Right would consider dangerously radical. Most remarkable perhaps, given the current rhetoric of the Religious Right, is the fact that early American Baptists and Methodists, far from exalting the traditional family as the premier Christian institution and the ultimate Christian value, saw such families as impeding a true Christian recognition that one's *real* family is not one's blood kin but one's community of faith. "Not only evangelical teaching but church practice," writes Heyrman, "called upon southerners to subordinate family allegiance to religious duty." This attitude toward kinfolk was so at odds, alas, with the ideas on which most Southerners had been brought up that it—along with all the other too-revolutionary convictions of early evangelicals—eventually fell victim to ministers' desire to fit more comfortably into the culture in which they lived. Today's Religious Right leaders thunder that mainline churches have sold out to prevailing cultural mores on issues like

[5] SOUTHERN CROSS: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt, by *Christine Leigh Heyrman.* Alfred A. Knopf. $27.50.

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feminism and gay rights; in fact the real accommodation took place generations ago, when their reactionary forebears turned away from the early Baptist and Methodist belief in radical equality and embraced racism, patriarchy, and the other totems of white mainstream Southern culture.

Reactionary religion is the subject of two new memoirs, in which ex-members of far-right Christian groups provide revealing accounts of their discipleship. *James Dobson's War on America*[6] is Gil Alexander-Moegerle's story of his years as the radio sidekick to the immensely influential founder of Focus on the Family, who is the prime avatar of family values for millions of fundamentalist Protestants; *Beyond the Threshhold: A Life in Opus Dei*,[7] by Maria del Carmen Tapia, recounts her close association with that secular Catholic organization's widely revered (and now beatified) founder, Josemaría Escrivá, whom she served as personal secretary and then as a leader in his women's branch.

The Dobson-Escrivá parallels are manifold. Both men established institutions that seek to be viewed as loving, inclusive, and engaged in Christian renewal but that are in fact ideologically rigid and motivated by social and political reaction. Both men labored mightily to create images of themselves as fatherly, all-knowing, and kind (indeed saintly), but both emerge from these books as intellectually undistinguished tyrants who were neurotically obsessed with sex and who treated subordinates shabbily. Both men publicly emphasized their respect for women and their concern for women's work and spirituality; both are exposed in these books as sexist pigs who privately upheld the idea of the church as a men's club.

Both accounts, though convincing overall, are less than elegantly written and are full of dull and repetitive institutional details. Both authors seem determined to lay out every last grievance, to expose every long-nursed wound. Both still seem rather too fixated on the men who once ruled their worlds. And both do an insufficiently convincing job of explaining why they spent years as helpmeets to men whom they now depict as despots, bigots, mediocrities. Particularly perplexing is Tapia's account of her entry into and exit from Opus Dei. She joined despite the warnings of friends and family and in doing so called off an impending wedding; though she doesn't make clear her motivation here, it is hard not to surmise that an apprehension about marriage had more than a little to do with her joining Escrivá's puritanical organization. And though Tapia characterizes herself, during her last months in Opus Dei, as a "prisoner" who wasn't allowed out of its Rome headquarters, her memoir suggests that she had ample opportunities to leave; she stayed

[6] JAMES DOBSON'S WAR ON AMERICA, by *Gil Alexander-Moegerle.* Prometheus. $25.95.

[7] BEYOND THE THRESHOLD: A Life in Opus Dei, by *Maria del Carmen Tapia.* Continuum. $29.95.

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not because she was under lock and key, apparently, but because she couldn't bring herself to defy the Father (as Escrivá was called by Opus Dei members during his lifetime).

Indeed, given the sinister reputation of Opus Dei in liberal Catholic circles and given Focus on the Family's relentless depiction of conventional families as godly and homosexuals as satanic, both books do less damage than one might have expected (and hoped). In both, what is ultimately most fascinating is not the nasty, hypocritical inner workings of the religious organizations in question but the psychology of decent, intelligent people like Alexander-Moegerle and Tapia who eagerly join up.

At the other end of the theological spectrum from narrow dogmatists like Dobson and Escrivá are a host of writers who seek to "set the gospel free," as the title of one of their books puts it. *When We Talk about God . . . Let's Be Honest*[8] by R. Kirby Godsey, president of Mercer University (a Baptist institution in Georgia), is addressed in plain language to a relatively unsophisticated readership of evangelical Christians whom Godsey seeks to liberate from a fixation on dubious doctrine and bibliolatry; *Setting the Gospel Free: Experiential Faith and Contemplative Practice*[9] by Brian C. Taylor, an Episcopal priest in New Mexico, and *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*[10] by Marcus Borg, a professor of religion at Oregon State (and also an Episcopalian), speak to a more sophisticated audience of disaffected mainline-church types. Taylor's book emphasizes "contemplative prayer" and will be of special interest to people who were born Christians and who have dabbled in New Age and/or Eastern religions; Borg's has hundreds of footnotes and will interest readers of a serious intellectual bent.

Both Taylor and Borg begin by telling of their own spiritual makeovers. Taylor was a veteran parish priest on the day in 1991 when he suddenly wearied of religion, feeling that it "had become a *thing*, a big important heavy thing which I was obliged to keep alive." A Zen retreat and a comment by a friend that "religion is just a form" helped him see that "Jesus and God could begin to make sense in a new and refreshing way." Borg came to the same awareness gradually, starting with his seminary days in the early 1960s. Having lost the dogmatic faith of his Lutheran childhood, he gradually developed a belief in a God who "is the beyond in our midst" and in a Jesus who "is the image of the invisible God."

[8] WHEN WE TALK ABOUT GOD . . . LET'S BE HONEST, by *R. Kirby Godsey*. Smith & Helwys. $19.95.

[9] SETTING THE GOSPEL FREE: Experiential Faith and Contemplative Practice, by *Brian C. Taylor*. Continuum. $17.95.

[10] THE GOD WE NEVER KNEW: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith, by *Marcus J. Borg*. HarperSanFrancisco. $18.00.

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Though there are differences in style and emphasis among these three books, the similarities are striking. Each of the three titles would have perfectly suited any of the three books. Near the beginning of all three, the authors argue against placing too much emphasis on dogma or on the institutional church. All three emphasize that scripture should not be read literally, that Christianity is a religion not of doctrines but of love, and that God is bigger than any words we can find to describe him. "Our religion is only a small expression of the Creator," writes Taylor, "for God's being is expressed in infinite form. God will not be limited by our piety or owned by whatever forms we develop." Similarly, Godsey writes that "No human words are sufficient to contain God. . . . no finite person has absolute answers."

All three writers agree that the Resurrection need not be understood to refer to an actual return from the dead, that when Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God he meant not an afterlife but an experience of God's presence here and now, and that salvation should be seen as referring not to deliverance into heaven but to healing and reconciliation on earth. Godsey: "Salvation means mending what is broken and reconciling what has been estranged." Taylor: trusting God in times of trouble "is salvation, because by this action we are returned to our original at-one-ment with God." Borg: salvation comes "through life with God" and "has to do with healing the wounds of existence." And all three talk about Jesus in much the same way. Godsey: "The message of the Christian faith is not to worship Jesus. It is to follow him. Jesus points to God." Taylor: "It is easier to worship Jesus than to follow him. . . . He pointed to God's kingdom everywhere." Borg: Jesus is "an epiphany of God . . . a revelation of the sacred" who taught us that "the religious life is not about requirements but about relationship."

These three men, varied in gifts and temperament, have travelled different roads to the same truths. Which book a given reader finds most congenial will depend largely on which author he or she identifies with most strongly.

Godsey, Taylor, and Borg seek to help readers move beyond narrow dogmatism to an understanding that the essence of Christianity is not about dogma but about spiritual experience. This is also a key part of the message of Hans Küng's *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future.*[11] Küng, the Swiss architect of Vatican II who may be the greatest theologian of the century but who is currently *persona non grata* at the papal *palazzo,* has produced a magisterial, scholarly 900-page treatise that is at the same time thoroughly accessible to general readers. Though it covers a lot of historical and theological ground, the book's main point is a simple one which recalls Brian Taylor's observation that "religion is just a form"—namely, that while Christianity's predominant form has undergone

[11] CHRISTIANITY: Essence, History, and Future, by *Hans Küng.* Continuum. $29.95.

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many radical shifts over the centuries, from the early Christians' apocalyptic paradigm to the early Church's Hellenistic paradigm (which survives in today's Eastern Orthodoxy) to the medieval Roman Catholic paradigm (which led to present-day Catholic authoritarianism) to Reformation Protestantism (which bequeathed us Protestant fundamentalism) to the "Enlightenment modern paradigm" (which is embodied in liberal modernism), the "abiding substance of faith"—namely, the person of Jesus Christ—has remained the same.

These paradigm shifts, Küng argues, have been necessitated by changes in human society; his purpose is to suggest the nature of the shift needed to bring Christianity successfully into the new millennium. Too often, he notes, past paradigm shifts have occasioned acrimony and bloodshed; Küng seeks peaceful transition into a period of global ecumenism when Christians, Jews, and Moslems (he has written substantial books about each of these faiths) live together in mutual respect, understanding, and edification. Drawing on its author's voluminous knowledge of religious history and showcasing his enormous erudition, this book mounts a cogent argument for the proposition that radical theological change, far from representing a betrayal of the Christian past, has been the rule throughout the annals of Christianity and is unavoidable today if the essence and vitality of the faith are to be preserved.

The existence of most of the books I've reviewed is cheeringly reflective of a new, exciting climate of vigorous religious inquiry among America's educated overclass. Lamentably, however, millions of people who would profit richly from these books will never read any of them. Instead, they'll be listening to James Dobson on the radio, watching Pat Robertson on "The 700 Club"—and starving spiritually. Such is the climate of the soul of God's Country as the millennium approaches.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

"The Future of the Book: A Prophecy" was originally delivered by THOMAS M. DISCH for the Association of American University Presses last summer. . . . JOSEPH EPSTEIN's latest book is *Life Sentences*, a collection of literary essays published by W. W. Norton. . . . ROBERT SCHULTZ is the author, most recently, of *The Madhouse Nudes* (Simon & Schuster) and *Winter in Eden* (Loess Hills Books). . . . JOYCE ZONANA* is an Associate Professor of English at the University of New Orleans where she recently won the Alumni Award for Teaching Excellence. . . . JOHN HALES* teaches American Literature and writing at California State University, Fresno. He is completing a collection of essays titled *Shooting Polaris* based on his experiences as a surveyor for the Bureau of Land Management in Southern Utah. . . . LAURENCE LIEBERMAN's latest book of poems is *Compass of the Dying* (University of Arkansas Press). *Regatta in the Sky* is forthcoming from the University of Georgia this fall. . . . LAURA APOL* teaches children's literature, literary theory, and writing at Michigan State University. . . . TOM SEXTON is Alaska's Poet Laureate. His latest book is *A Blossom of Snow* (Mad River Press). . . . PETER SCHMITT's* two collections of poems are *Hazard Duty* and *Country Airport* (Copper Beech).

ANDREA HOLLANDER BUDY's* first full-length collection of peoms, *House Without a Dreamer* (Story Line Press, 1993), won the Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize. . . . JANE MAYHALL lives in New York and is currently writing a memoir about the early years of Black Mountain College and completing a book of short stories for the Eakins Press. . . . ROBERT HILL LONG's book of poems *The Work of the Bow* was published by Cleveland State University in 1997. . . . P.H. LIOTTA* is the author of the memoir *Learning to Fly: A Season with the Peregrine Falcon*; *Rules of Engagement*, a collection of poems; *Diamond's Compass*, a novel of Iran; and *The Ruins of Athens: A Balkan Memoir*. . . . BERT CARDULLO is the co-author of the recently published book *The Crommelynck Mystery: The Life and Work of a Belgian Playwright* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1997). . . . JOSIAH FISK is the editor of *Composers on Music*, an anthology of writings from the Middle Ages to the present published by Northeastern University Press. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY teaches in the Writing Program at Rutgers University and is editing an anthology of modern essays to be published by Persea Books this year. . . . TESS LEWIS' translation of Peter Handke's *Once Again for Thucydides* will be published by New Directions this summer. . . . Ivan R. Dee has just brought out JAMES W. TUTTLETON's *A Fine Silver Thread: Essays on American Writing*. . . . RICHARD TILLINGHAST's latest book, *Today in the Café Trieste* (new and selected poems), is distributed by Dufour Editions. . . . BRUCE BAWER's newest book is *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*.

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

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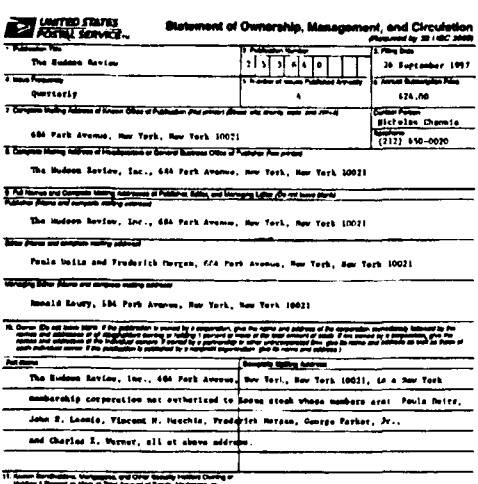

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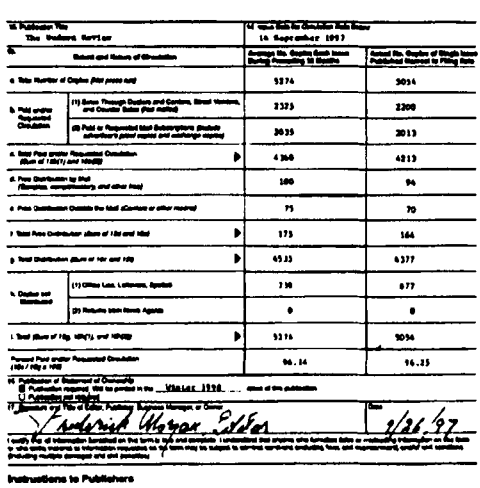

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IN THIS ISSUE:

As for literature, in the old-fashioned, honorific sense, it will not disappear, but like the opera, the ballet, painting, sculpture, and other arts, it will become increasingly a curatorial venue. There have already been more good books written than any of us can ever get around to. If one is too often disappointed by the current offerings of publishers, the past is vast and easily accessible in an age of mechanical reproduction. As with classical music, it will be the backlist that wags the dog.
—Thomas M. Disch, "The Future of the Book: A Prophecy," p. 534.

In fact, the Globe project is, among other things, an extraordinary laboratory for analyzing Shakespeare's drama, and his age. The degree of scholarship behind it is beyond what the folks at Disney ever dream of. (Besides, Disney never recreates historical structures in order to *learn* anything, but only to accommodate what its customers already know.) More important, the Globe is also an exciting new performance space, of a sort not seen anywhere since 1642, when the Puritans . . . closed down the big public theatres in London. It is as if someone unearthed an ancient musical instrument, began tooting on it, and discovered that it can emit a sumptuous, resonant music no living person has ever before heard.
—Richard Hornby, "The Globe Restored," p. 617.

In defending the West as the chief source not only of freedoms that enlarge human possibility but as the source of the very ideas that produced race-gender-class critics in the first place, [John M.] Ellis describes the unreal and distorted pictures of the past on which these critics' cases depend. And he asks, Why is patriarchy being challenged now rather than earlier? Were earlier women unconcerned about their crushing burdens or defective in the willpower needed to relieve them? His answer is worth pondering: the change in the status of women in contemporary society comes about "not because they have at last woken up to the enormity of the plot against them but because the conditions of human life have changed."
—Harold Fromm, "Humanities Beleaguered," p. 649.

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